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The Sanitized City and Other Urban Myths:

Fantasies of Risk and Illness in the

Twentieth Century Metropolis

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Comparative Literature

by

David Matthew Youssef

2012

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Sanitized City and Other Urban Myths:

Fantasies of Risk and Illness in the

Twentieth Century Metropolis

by

David Matthew Youssef

Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

University of California, Los Angeles, 2012

Professor N. Katherine Hayles, Co-Chair

Professor Todd Presner, Co-Chair

This project is oriented around a comparative analysis of cultural production concerning the metropolitan regions of Los Angeles and Berlin in the twentieth century. While combining approaches toward the history of science and medicine with film and literary studies, this dissertation analyzes the relationship between the increase in invisible risks within large urban centers, and the emergence of illnesses characterized by having undecidable causes (a confusion as to whether they originate from external causes or internal, potentially psychogenic ones.) The body of literature and film addressed in this project, ranging from the turn-of-the-century poetic prose of Rainer Maria Rilke, into 1920's expressionist film and literature in Weimar Berlin, to

film noir and Frankfurt School philosophy during the World War II period in Los Angeles and finally to late twentieth century science fiction, explores the cultural effects and implications of the paradigm shift to bacteriology in modern medicine and disease pathology at the end of the nineteenth century. By tracing the experience of undecidable illness within film and literature, this project demonstrates how the paradigm of positivistic disease causation, which resulted from the discovery of the microbe, may have actually generated a radical insecurity within modern society, characterized by anxieties and fears of infection, to the point where many different kinds of psychosomatic, mimetic and psychogenic illnesses also became more widespread. Narrative accounts of undefined illness that were not yet understood scientifically often portrayed experiences of urban community as a collection of anxious impressions of the larger networks of metropolitan infrastructure and the increasing interconnections between multiple individuals which it facilitates, including an invisible dimension of microbiology. These narratives emphasize how urban infrastructure can convey the ineffable presence of “spectral” dangers.

The dissertation of David Matthew Youssef is approved.

Eleanor Kaufman

Kathleen Komar

N. Katherine Hayles, Committee Co-Chair

Todd Presner, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2012

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VITA

After getting his Bachelor's Degree in World Literature and Cultural Studies, David Youssef's research has focused on interdisciplinary approaches toward metropolitan literature in both the European and North American contexts, particularly emphasizing urban studies, history of science and medicine, cinema studies, and critical theory. His dissertation research has focused on the comparative cultural contexts of Berlin and Los Angeles at various stages of their development in order to emphasize the literary dimensions of the metropolis and urban public health in the twentieth century.

After receiving a generous dissertation fellowship from Eric Sundquist and the Center for Jewish Studies at UCLA in 2008, he successfully completed his final examinations and advanced to candidacy in 2009. Fluent in German, Youssef also spent a significant amount of time in Germany during the latter stages of his dissertation research and writing, and in 2010-2011, he received a Research Grant from the DAAD to continue his work on comparative literary urbanism in Berlin.

During his tenure at UCLA, he had the opportunity to teach a wide variety of undergraduate courses, primarily within the departments of German Studies and Comparative Literature as a teaching assistant, which ranged from classes such as "Hypermedia Berlin," "The Holocaust in Film and Literature," to "The Dialectics of Colonial Sovereignty."

Youssef also gave presentations in both the ACLA Conference in Puebla, Mexico and the Figures of Comparison Conference at Columbia University in 2007 in panels focusing respectively on historical memory and psychoanalysis. He also published an article, entitled

respectively on historical memory and psychoanalysis. He also published an article, entitled “Electronic Ruins: Virtual Landscapes Out of History,” in a website compendium to N. Katherine Hayles’ book *Electronic Literature: Playing, Interpreting, Teaching* in 2007.

During each of the summers of 2006, 2007 and 2008, Youssef also received a Summer Research Grant to develop a critical photoessay on spatial transformations and modern ruins in post-millennial Berlin.

Introduction

One of the salient features that marks the beginning of the twentieth century is the unprecedented clustering of populations into urban areas to a degree never seen before in human history. This process of urban growth has continued almost exponentially into the twenty-first century—along with an entrenchment and proliferation of its problems and pitfalls—to the point where in 2007 the global urban population came to exceed that of rural regions.¹ Large urban centers rely upon an infrastructure that functions on the basis of a consummate technical manipulation of nature, coordinating its processes into manageable, and hence more predictable, forms which are able to move in consort with the everyday rhythms of trade, production and distribution. Insofar as nature is present within the big city, it must be tamed and assigned a socially useful role or at least remain in a position which does not interfere with the functioning of city life. This conversion of nature into an object of mastery is achieved through the refinement of a built environment that also shuns and suppresses the eruptions of unmanaged nature because of their potentially volatile consequences. As Mike Davis points out in his *Dead Cities*, “In the ‘Americanized big city’...the quest for the bourgeois utopia of a totally calculable and safe environment has paradoxically generated radical insecurity (unheimlich.)”² The construction of such an environment that can claim to be free of the vicissitudes of the natural world is perpetually haunted by the trace of a nature that could never be fully integrated or completely sanitized out of existence. However, while this specter of “unsanitized” or unmanaged nature continues to be substantiated by actual eruptions or disasters which disturb, sometimes catastrophically, the highly refined functioning of interwoven urban systems, it also is

¹ Science Daily. 2007. <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/05/070525000642.htm>

² Mike Davis. *Dead Cities and Other Tales*. New York: The New Press, 2002.

provided with a position of near epistemological necessity due to the predominance of a particular scientific paradigm of microbiology which demonstrated that a complete mastery of nature would also have to take the world of microscopic life into account.

The innovations in bacteriology in the latter half of the nineteenth century put an end to a widespread belief in the classical approaches to the origins and treatments of disease, which up to that point tended to conceive of disease either as an imbalance within the constitutional make-up of the human body or, more in the tradition of folk belief and superstition, as an instance of possession by a non-material, ghostly entity which could assume control over the physical and/or mental processes of the individual. This shift in attributing disease causation to a discrete, external entity meant that through hygienic measures, adopted by individuals and municipal organizations, the proliferation of dangerous microorganisms to toxic levels could be prevented, even though these organisms would never be fully eradicated. Due to advances within the field of bacteriology, as well as its marvelous success-rate in stemming the deleterious effects of contagious illness, a mode of envisioning danger, as something ineradicable and yet, for all intents and purposes, invisible, became widely adopted as a way of linking the appearance of disruptions in the urban fabric back to their minute and often, undetectable causes. Thus, urban *risk*, a place-holder for known and unknown dangers that is also substantiated by statistical projections and scientific proof, is *out there*, and even though its location at any given instant may be unknown and its existence as a *fact* can never be confirmed because risk is a notion that operates within the logic of probability and potential (meaning that as soon as a risk becomes manifest, it also ceases to be a risk), it is immanent to social networks and infrastructural

complexes as a silently circulating feature—a feature to which individuals may also be psychologically attuned.

Because this project is largely an exploration of the larger socio-cultural significance of disease etiology through its divergent fictional representations in literature and film, *as well as the role of the imagination in the medical construction of disease etiology*, we will examine the superstructural consequences of a scientific revolution that radically opened up new horizons in public health and medicine in the twentieth century, a revolution that was also a phase-shift in the understanding of *life* that broke with traditions thousands of years old. In very particular ways, this essay will demonstrate how older modes of understanding, outmoded by the paradigm at hand, are often given a second lease on life in a more closeted form, feeding off the newfound terrain that was responsible for their banishment. The body of literature and film that we will analyze, a body which also spans most of the twentieth century and focuses on three cities on two continents, indicates that the belief in, as well as the direct observation and personal experience of, a more “animistic” approach to disease did not disappear in the face of the new discovery of microbiological malevolence. Rather, the 20th century has witnessed a veritable increase in the variety of diseases whose causes remain difficult to pin down, and whose symptoms do not seem to correspond to any germ yet discovered. This project will examine how the discovery of the microbe and the paradigm of positivistic external disease causation actually may have increased the variety, and possibly the frequency, of illnesses that have no known correspondence to a discrete germ, and thus continue to be described as the result of mimicry, suggestion, simulation, psychological causes or even magic.

The experience of an illness not yet understood or considered legitimate by the operative medical paradigm is often something left over to be processed and explored within the domain of fiction, considering that science has already reached its limits.³ While this project is already an intersection of urban studies and the history of science and medicine, it is important to clarify why literature and film will provide the primary content for analysis in each chapter. For my purposes, the literature and films that address anomalies of illness attempt to process the historical meaning of the experience of illnesses not considered to be “real” by physicians and society at large, illnesses which are then relegated to an imaginary status. These experiences, however fictional, provide a critical vantage on scientific paradigms that have a particular historical value because experience that is perceived as illegitimate within a given historical period also delineates quite profoundly the boundaries of legitimate knowledge within such a period. In this regard, fiction may often provide a more detailed history of epistemological periods from the (subaltern) voices and perspectives that were discounted at the time. Within such fictional works, narratives will often explore the tension of conceiving of an illness in its state of vacillation between reality and fantasy, an *undecidability* which also evades realistic description unless that realism can somehow account for phenomena which fall outside of the dominant paradigm.

The twentieth century metropolis, with populations exceeding the million mark, also produced a demand for new cultural forms that could grasp its nature and magnitude. As a result,

³ This experience of being “abandoned by science” is masterfully narrated in the film *Safe* (*Safe*. Dir. Todd Haynes. American Playhouse Theatrical Films, 1995. Film) in which a woman from the San Fernando Valley experiencing a strange “environmental illness” with horrific symptoms is told by the medical establishment that all her symptoms are psychosomatic. While it is likely that the film is trying to capture the emergence of AIDS into the heterosexual world in the late 1980’s, it does an excellent job of sketching the horror, psychological turmoil, and hopelessness of having an undecidable illness.

various kinds of metropolitan literatures tasked themselves with the feat of trying to harness the sheer force of such concentrated quantity into an appropriate aesthetic. While a 19th century European realism tended to condense the urban experience into the various archetypes which animated it, its allegorical approach proved insufficient for conveying the richness and layering of the twentieth century super-city. The twentieth century metropolis, whose “archetypes” may have only changed slightly from their nineteenth century counterparts, is an entirely different beast, and this is primarily due to the aggregation of unheard of quantities of people, goods, and infrastructure concentrated into one locale. Thus, metropolitan literature had to reckon with quantities so massive that they generated new qualities. While realism could trace the objective movements on the canvas of urban life and erect stories whose cause and effect operated under Newtonian precision, its sketches of everyday existence failed to give contour and scope to the quantitative proportionality of people, things, and intersecting lives that appeared in novel concentrations in the big city. Realism needed another attribute that could convey the statistical mass behind singular events and tendencies, a “mythic” dimension which could assume the burden of representing quantity while never violating the norms and strictures of a rationalized scientific paradigm. Mythic realism grasps the fact that while the diversity of different modes of life in the city may be representable, their sheer quantity needs the help of the mythic in order to take on aesthetic form.

While this project is composed of an examination of metropolitan cultural production spanning the twentieth century that focuses on urbanism in general, including sections on turn-of-the-century metropolitan literature in Paris, it is primarily framed around a comparative analysis of the cities of Berlin and Los Angeles, and their modalities of growth during the

century. While each city has quite different beginnings, they share the characteristic of reaching the status of true metropolis much later and much more rapidly than their other European and American counterparts. In Los Angeles, an awesome urbanity emerged within a 30 year period out of an arid desert region dappled with sparse rancho settlements, whereas in Berlin metropolitan growth paved over an existing urban infrastructure, adding hundreds of thousands of new residents in the last decade of the nineteenth century. But because these cities became global players much later than other colonial metropolises in Europe or the industrial centers of the eastern seaboard in the United States, they were also able to take advantage of the mistakes and pitfalls of development already experienced in other places, and hence could adopt more sophisticated municipal techniques of resource management and planning with the promise of providing a dream of sanitized modernity for residents, bolstered by myths of safety, hygiene and predictability within a highly-managed environment. Both cities in their own ways promulgated a vision of hygienic modern living which was to varying degrees based on good health, security and racial purity, and because this dream was advertised and pushed with such a vengeance, especially in Los Angeles, it became a complicated endeavor to address the instances of disruption in which this dream failed to deliver, disruptions which took the form of disease, accidents, extreme poverty, or even racial diversity. While, on the one hand, these cities conveyed the dream of a safe, sanitized and calculable environment, an aspect which brought a tinge of mysticism to even smallest violations of this order, on the other hand, the metropolis was also recognized and imagined as a space in which a radical kind of intermixing could take place, between different groups of people and new environmental factors, all of whose consequences

could not be accurately predicted—an element of chance which was both a source of anxiety for urban inhabitants, as well as an undeniable potential for risk.

This project will narrow its focus onto the nexus between the imagination (and actual emergence) of new, unknown risks and perils originating from the hybrid world of the “modern” metropolis, and the increased proliferation of illnesses characterized as “undecidable,” or as vaguely situated somewhere between real and imagined. This nexus marks and problematizes the boundary between unknown risks, along with the ailments they may cause, and the experience of anomalous illness. While fantasies which narrate and supply the texture of actuality for modern urban risk have become a staple of Western industrialized culture (as broadcast in the mainstream media, as well as on its artistic fringes), and sketch the boundaries of human frailty within the built environment, the private experience of “risk-fantasy,” seen in more extreme cases where individuals react with panic and paranoia to their environments, may start to resemble a kind of sickness in its own right. On the one hand, the metropolis produces new dangers, new diseases and new forms of risk not immediately visible to the naked eye, nor yet processed by the machinery of scientific truth, but on the other, the sheer *potential* within the big city to generate invisible and unknown risk must be acknowledged as an important part of the etiology of other kinds of peculiarly metropolitan disorders whose scientific status as illnesses was questionable in various historical periods, disorders often labeled as simulative, mimetic, suggestive or psychogenic.

According to Ulrich Beck, the emergence of what he calls the “risk society” is essentially the unintended result of processes of modernization and industrialization, whose initial aims were to liberate human populations from the dangers and unpredictability of the natural world.

“In the past, the hazards could be traced back to an *undersupply* of hygienic technology. Today they have basis in industrial *overproduction*. The risks and hazards of today thus differ in an essential from their superficially similar ones in the Middle Ages through the global nature of their threat and through their *modern* causes. They are the risks *of* modernization.”⁴ Thus, a proliferation of unpredictable risks is already intimately connected to a logic of sanitization within larger infrastructural concentrations of population. The hygienic practices which make urban co-existence possible at such a scale are also the source of dangers that have not yet even been theorized, let alone encountered. Within the plenitude of factors which must be grasped statistically in order to prognosticate or to make expert decisions concerning the lives and well-being of the many, there are also a multiplicity of other factors at work which may not reach the threshold of visibility, but may nonetheless be intimately interwoven with other visible factors. This means that part of the body of potentially threatening factors within a given domain is beyond the grasp of statistical inquiry, but nevertheless forms a significant part of what might be called a “totality of risk.” As Beck claims, “What escapes perceptibility no longer coincides with the unreal, but can instead even possess a higher degree of hazardous reality.” (44) This entails that often the only approach toward novel hazards is through the avenue of the imagination and its fantastical products. This invisible domain of risk may remain as such for a variety of reasons, but also because of what Bruno Latour might call the occlusion of hybridity by purifying epistemological regimes.⁵ The invisible interconnected hybridity which helps make up the

⁴ Ulrich Beck. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage Publications, 1992. p.21

⁵ Bruno Latour. *We Never Been Modern*. New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993. Latour’s argument is that the construct of modernity relies upon a false epistemological separation between the products and processes of nature and culture, even though the modern age is characterized by a massive increase in “hybrids” of nature/culture—hybrids which cannot be conceived within modern epistemological frameworks.

totality of risk cannot be represented empirically, which means that it cannot be confirmed through scientific experimentation. The postulation of something invisibly present is always the work of theory and fantasy, and the way the existence of the invisible is confirmed is through an inventory and analysis of symptoms. From this perspective, it becomes more possible to see how the proper occupation of political forces may actually be the business of framing and representing invisible risk in particular ways.

However, while many such fantasies are not considered to be accurate portrayals of real dangers, there are other “healthy,” realistic fantasies that help to prevent people from becoming negligent and forgetting their fragility within such a massive infrastructure. These fantasies, insofar as they are realistic and probable, are also often to be found within mass media and the insurance sector, which means that not only are these fantasies used to sell insurance, they are also actively “invested in” by individuals and groups alike who find these risks to be laudable and, to a certain degree, unavoidable. While the validity of risk-fantasies is most certainly subject to the purview of science and statistical calculation, it may also be subject to the dominant ideas of the historical period, which also entails that some risks may be acknowledged and provided for that science has not yet proven to be possible. As Beck states, “There is no expert on risk.” (29) This suggests that a risk-fantasy may shift from being considered realistic to a status of being seen as a “myth,” or vice-versa, in different periods of history. This flip-flopping between science and myth, in a kind of “disenchantment of disenchantment”⁶ or “reflexive modernization,”⁷ also parallels the logic of undecidable illness. The increase of cases of this flip-

⁶ Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1997.

⁷ Beck, Ulrich. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage Publications, 1992.

flopping between science and myth, as well as in new varieties of undecidable illness, is a marked feature of the twentieth century, which may lead one to be more tentative and cautious when accepting scientific fact, even though science provides the authority upon which most other claims must ultimately stand.

This raises the question as to what it means to be afflicted by an invisible threat that is not yet considered to be scientifically credible, as well as the credibility of such an experience. While the fields of psychology and psychoanalysis have helped drive home the point that regardless of how “psychological” an illness is, it is still experienced as real by the afflicted person and should thus be treated accordingly, there remains a stigma against such psychogenic illnesses that may differentiate them in terms of perceived importance from others that have external causes. While psychogenic illnesses can be more easily attributed to the mental and physical constitutions of the people who have them than the environments in which they live, there remains an inexorable trace of the fear that the “true” external cause will eventually be discovered, proving everyone to be vulnerable to such an illness or that it is actually somehow contagious. I believe this to be an unintended result of the discovery of the microbe and the development of the field of bacteriology. The discovery of the microbe resulted in a massive change in medical discourse in that diseases became classified according to the microscopic agents which caused them. This also led to an overall paradigm shift which universalized the speculation that all diseases would eventually be attributed with their external causes, but also that those that did not have a discrete cause were considered less and less to be legitimate diseases, unless there was a compelling enough argument made by the sheer number of cases cropping up that warranted a heightened investigation.

Thus, it was often the case that individuals were left in a state of instability and insecurity because it remained unclear if their illness actually existed as a medical fact, let alone if there was a cure for it. However, this state, defined by an unknown illness that straddles the fence between real and imagined, truly describes a particular “sacred” spiritual condition of the 20th century, and in such a state of unrecognized sickness one is offered a particular view into a world of interconnections between human life, infrastructure and a microscopic world of invisible friends and enemies—a sacred world of biosocial intimacy—the experience of which remains stuck at the point in which myth and science intersect. This is the peculiar historical status of the experience of the undecidable illness: one has an experience long before, or way after, that experience could be considered real. Thus, such a disease may be experienced as a break with the epistemological foundations of one’s historical situation, even though it can also be said that such undecidability is really one of the more radical experiences of one’s historical situation that can be had (considering that some novel combination of causes has generated new symptoms or that one is having an experience of the metropolis that cannot be classified using contemporary knowledge.)⁸

In Priscilla Wald’s path-breaking work, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*,⁹ she demonstrates how what she calls the “outbreak narrative” in fiction not only appeared in literary genres that narrativized the discovery and spread of epidemic diseases, but also was itself adopted by fledgling institutions in the field of epidemiology as a way of

⁸ The kind of mode of detection and investigation of such experiences requires a similar approach to historical material articulated by Walter Benjamin, in which the historian is receptive to a “constellation” as it forms in the present moment. However, in this case, the matter at hand is not the past; it is rather a kernel of current reality that is unreachable through accepted categories of knowledge of the historical moment.

⁹ Priscilla Wald. *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers and the Outbreak Narrative*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008.

structuring their discursive practices. For example, the narrative device of determining an origin of an epidemic disease, or attributing it to a particular individual or group, as the first step to combating its spread, became integrated into the methods by which disease-hunters around the turn of the century would structure their findings for public dissemination. In this case, she demonstrates how the work of literary form must also be seen as part of an institutional technology. While this project will also explore the nexus between narrative and medical discursive-practice, it will concern itself more specifically with how fiction and narrative is demanded, and in some cases, necessitated in order to properly conceive of the meaning of biological community.

Wald also discusses the notion of contagiousness in literary works of the Middle Ages before germ theory and the positivistic externality of disease causation were developed.

Literary depictions of plague-ridden societies evince the complex vocabulary through which members of a ravaged population both respond to epidemics and experience the social connections that make them a community. The word *contagion* literally means “to touch together,” and one of its earliest uses in the fourteenth century referred to the circulation of ideas and attitudes. It frequently denoted danger or corruption...The medical usage of the term was no more and no less metaphorical than its ideational counterpart. The circulation of disease and the circulation of ideas were material and experiential, even if not visible. Both displayed the power and danger of bodies in contact and demonstrated the simultaneous fragility and tenacity of social bonds. (13)

This “touching-together” of contagiousness after the rise of bacteriology also presupposes an entity which is collectively comprised out of all these points of contact; however, the contagious network of the social body must also necessarily include infrastructure and attributes of the physical environment that cannot be considered alive according to any biological definition. This means that, in their own way, objects also do the “touching” which makes up this infectious

community. However, this mutual contact between humans, as well as with their microscopic neighbors, either directly or through the medium of an infrastructural environment, cannot be empirically registered in its totality, but can be envisioned through speculative cognition and its artifacts—works of fiction. This blend between the human, the microbiological, and the practical/infrastructural is the terrain which will be explored in this essay, a terrain whose discovery is the result of a scientific revolution, but yet a terrain whose consistency and structure cannot be mapped scientifically in the absence of contagion. For this mapping and making legible, the services of the imagination are required to give this terrain its consistency and its structure, even though some of its links may be entirely fictional.

The reason why I suggest that the experience of biosocial intimacy is characterized by the intersection of science and myth is because it also dredges up the notion of alternative modalities of disease causation that resemble the logic of certain kinds of mimesis, suggestive power and possession by “spirits,” all of which have a mythical or magical element that is no longer appropriate within scientific epistemology. The literary instances of biosocial intimacy which this essay will explore (from Rilke’s turn of the century *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*¹⁰ all the way to Octavia Butler’s late-twentieth century *Parable of the Sower*)¹¹ narrate the uncanny emergence of a repressed mimetic faculty within human beings that can cause the rampant simulation of disease symptoms, symptoms which may then become, in their own way, socially contagious. However, innovations in science have also expanded the capacity for a mimetic or “magical” faculty to perform its work. Because the specter of danger can be lurking anywhere in the city, hidden within its everyday networks, one may more easily manifest the

¹⁰ Rainer Maria Rilke. *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

¹¹ Octavia Butler. *Parable of the Sower*. New York: Time Warner International, 1998.

effects of such dangers through a mimetic complex. In this regard, *this nexus of the scientific and the mimetic actually increases the amount of cases of sensitivity to spectral dangers even though spectral dangers have ultimately been scientifically disproved as the actual causes of disease.*

Because bacteriology allows for the agents of disease to be present virtually everywhere in a city, this has inadvertently led to the increase in diseases of simulation and mimicry that tend to fixate on perceived malevolence within features of urban geography and architecture.

The built environment itself also provides the back-drop and stage for risk-fantasies to be played out in a cultural imaginary, whether it is staging an accident, contagion, or some other calamity, and in the process, urban infrastructure becomes saturated with risk-fantasies on a symbolic level. This poses a set of questions for how humans relate to infrastructure within a metropolis, as there are certain kinds of infrastructure that are perceived as carrying a threatening, yet invisible baggage, and others appear to convey a hygienic surface that has not been tampered with by everyday history, however factually untrue these perceptions may be. While the character of Malte Laurids Brigge in Rilke's novel often encounters the psychological perils of urban infrastructure which manifest for him as sensory disorientation and hallucinations within the public space, and a heightened sensitivity to the spectrality of furniture, clothing and dwelling within his more intimate spaces, there is also another kind of infrastructure that provides him with a sense of security (as typified in the monumental building of the Bibliothèque National.) What this suggests, however, is that urban infrastructure, both public and private, possesses a contagious phantasmic register, a register that is somehow quieted at least for Malte

within monumental space.¹² However, in other public locations within the metropolis, spectral dangers abound, as concatenations of lost history that are somehow infectious, even though their mode of transmission is not biological—and rather resembles something more supernatural.

The advent of investigations into the concepts of biopower and the biopolitical, which have surfaced after more recent excavations and translations of Foucault's later works, have shown the rise to hegemony of a strategy of power, labeled by Foucault under the heading of "security," whose object of inquiry and management is the collective life processes within a given population. Biopolitical approaches to understanding human community emphasize how the use of statistics and rationalization have generated forms of knowledge which dictate the management of large aggregations of individuals within states, cities or other sizable communal forms. Through these quantitative approaches, the overall "health" or "well-being" of the collective is determined through the calculation of its most detailed components.¹³ The concept of biosocial intimacy proposed here, however, is one which addresses a dimension of collective life which eludes rationalized categorization. This concept refers to the *ecological* intermixing of forms of life, and life-forms, within a context in which social and economic relations within

¹² Questions of monumentality have deeply informed the foundations of this project, and although many of these questions are no longer quite as central as they once were, it is important for me briefly refer to this terrain of thinking, as it does clarify some of the stakes of this project: What happens in spaces characterized by this monumentality? How is it that they remain free of the traces of everyday life, but yet carry a trace of the future that has already accepted them into it? This trace of the future seems to be expressed as one in which the phantasmagoria of urban "touching together" is no longer active; there is rather a loneliness in the silent soliloquy of an empty building or the poised statue, a contemplation of the historical process without the vital intersections of coexisting life-forms, without a social body. The phantasmic register of the monument is different than that of other features of urban infrastructure because the monument does not decay from use like other infrastructure. It has to be constantly renewed, making it in many ways the most hygienic space the metropolis has to offer. But what has to be sacrificed in order to keep these spaces pristine and in a constant of beginning anew? Clearly such expenses are provided for by the stewards of cultural preservation who range from elected governments with an allotted budget, to wealthy "patrons of the arts," to large insurance companies who reinvest their wealth into the iconography of cultural longevity.

¹³ Michel Foucault. *Security, Territory, Population*. New York: Picador, 2007.

human civilizations play a major role in structuring the way that these forms of life come into contact with one another. This concept also works to de-center the human as the primary site of orientation, and while including that which makes up human life, the concept addresses a more micro-biological level of materialism within human community that includes other life-forms, ranging from the flora and fauna of a region to the microscopic world of bacteria and viruses which humans co-inhabit. Biosociality avoids the pitfalls of “human exceptionalism,” which Donna Haraway has referred to, in her recent work *When Species Meet*,¹⁴ as “...the premise that humanity alone is not a spatial and temporal web of interspecies dependencies.” (11) The emergence of this phenomenon of biosociality as something conceptually available, I am arguing, has to do with major innovations within the paradigm of the medical sciences which occurred toward the end of the nineteenth century, most notably the discovery of the microbe.

I will argue that this overhaul in medicine and biology not only paved the way for new approaches to epidemiology and hygiene,¹⁵ and the deployment of new techno-scientific solutions to urban problems, but also that this epistemic shift yielded the ability to imagine collective life in a holistic manner, which deviated from the previous hegemony of religious notions. In other words, these scientific discoveries, rather than simply closing the door on the validity on other stories and theories of human co-habitation, radically opened a new imaginary terrain that fueled various twentieth century urban fantasies and narratives, a terrain that I will refer to as “mythic.” However, this study will also attempt to demonstrate that these imaginary creations were not simply depositories for the not-yet scientifically provable or visible, but rather

¹⁴ Donna J. Haraway. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

¹⁵ John M. Barry. *The Great Influenza*. London: Penguin Books, 2005.

that they played an active role in the composition, and making-legitimate, of newer, “biopolitical” institutions, as well as the deployment of new schemes of urban management. These fantasies are involved in a dynamic of what Ulrich Beck calls, “reflexive modernization,” in that modernizing processes became less concerned with the undermining and overhaul of pre-modern ideas and ideologemes, and turned their attention toward the modernizing of modernity’s own products.¹⁶

It is in this manner that I would like to address Adorno and Horkheimer’s notion in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*¹⁷ that enlightenment turns into myth, or that the machinations of techno-scientific authority carry within them a mythological kernel. Within the scientific frameworks that grant a statistical picture of the “social body” and the “biopolitical” institutions and infrastructure of public health which inform and generate policy to manage this body, we may find the substrate upon which major twentieth century “myths” have been erected. It is here that we see how the scientific, biopolitical invention/discovery of the social body is also a fictional, fantastic and literary entity, whose governance requires the work of fiction and narrative, and the fantastic depictions of threats against it in order to achieve its coherency. This is why “science fiction” has never simply been a supplement to new technological realities, but rather also, an elaboration of a mythological dimension that is inextricable from these new realities. Scientific discoveries have been known to abolish entrenched stories that human civilization may have fabricated out of less than reliable sources, but these same discoveries have also demanded new stories to give their content legibility and comprehensible form. It is these

¹⁶ Ulrich Beck. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage Publications, 1992.

¹⁷ Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1997

stories, fictional and otherwise, which often provide social meaning and parameters of comprehensibility to scientific knowledge, but also, how this knowledge becomes practical and is practiced. In this regard, twentieth century science fiction may need to be considered as much larger genre than previously thought.

The making of the social body is in part a literary invention, and the major tropes of this literary field include transmission, contagion, inheritance, infection, mimicry and possibly what could be called a “theory of acquired characteristics,” which lives on quietly after Darwinist notions of inheritance became the iron-clad law of the paradigm of evolutionary biology. According to Foucault in his discussions of biopolitics in *Security, Territory, Population*,¹⁸ towards the end of the eighteenth century the art of governance came to be associated with the entity of “population” which is in part a statistical construction composed of various factors and tendencies within a given collective. By abstracting from real tendencies in the body politic, governing institutions could see and respond to elements as rudimentary components within a larger mass, interacting with other statistically configured masses. While this pool of information represents the primary means by which governance and administration makes decisions on resource distribution, budgetary questions, and legislation which may deter or encourage certain behaviors, there is also an absolute necessity for stories to be told which illustrate and enliven these numbers with a narrative structure that different groups may identify with, personalizing abstract information. While journalism is a major field in which this takes place, attaching a variety of stories to “objective” features of the population, we will examine how certain modes of reporting, especially those dubbed as sensationalistic, often constructed their stories with an

¹⁸ Michel Foucault. *Security, Territory, Population*. New York: Picador, 2007.

eye for their adaptation into novels and film, a fact which indicates a certain degree of cross-pollination between the different branches of urban story-telling. Urban fiction took on the task of granting a legible perspective to certain modes of life within the city, whether or not these perspectives actually corresponded to those of real individuals. In this manner, fiction provides “simulations” for making sense out of biopolitical calculations and other larger social “facts.” It is within fiction that one may encounter a metaphoric trail connecting corruption with congenital illness, incest, ghetto districts, connections which illustrate the contagious character of biological variables, and their forms of transmission and transmutation in a sphere of metamorphosing human and non-human intimacy.

Chapter 1 will turn initially to Rilke’s *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*¹⁹ to investigate the characteristics of a strange and undecidable illness which afflicts the novel’s main character. On the one hand, Malte’s illness has all the trappings of hysteria or neurasthenia, but within his first person narration, it appears that his illness manifests as a quasi-hallucinatory experience of lost histories and the forgotten lives of the poverty-stricken underclasses within metropolitan Paris. Malte experiences a profound intimacy with urban life to which he has no personal connection, but which is somehow conveyed to him through architectural and infrastructural features of the city, indicating the presence of vast web of social and biological interconnectivity which lurks invisibly within the built environment. While Paris falls outside the comparative focus of this project, it does bear witness to some early examples of biosocial intimacy within metropolitan literature, and this particular work by Rilke will also function as a guiding philosophical framework for the investigation of other historical contexts and their

¹⁹ Rainer Maria Rilke. *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

literary products. After a shorter section on Walter Benjamin's theories of history and memory within the urban environment and the emergence of the figure of shock as a means of gaining access to a more sacred domain of urban life, we will move on to examine the emergence of Berlin as a *Grossstadt*, and how technologies of security and biopolitical approaches to large population concentrations drive the narrative in Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.²⁰ This section will analyze how the use of statistical models and categories take on a mythical aura when they are reactivated in fiction. Lastly this chapter will show how biosocial intimacy is conceived within abstract space in Fritz Lang's *M*.²¹ While showing how the dangerous and unproductive classes in Weimar Berlin are a vital component of the social body and are, on their own, able to solve a murder, this film also interrogates the failures and pitfalls of the welfare state.

Chapter 2 will continue an investigation of shock and trauma in metropolitan Berlin, particularly in cases of industrial and transportation accidents, and their relationship to the insurance sector of German welfare state. Here, I will examine the logic of insurance in determining the validity of various kinds of illness, and how insurance must directly ensconce itself in the grisly details of disruptions within the flow of urban production and organization. Insurance mediates between an urban mode of perception based in hyper-rationality, security, and calculability (an idiom born out of industrial exactitude) and instances of "mythic" eruptions of unmanaged nature that are not only contrary to the dream of sanitized modernity, but are also, statistically-speaking, expected to occur. Through analyzing more of the expressionist films of

²⁰ Alfred Döblin. *Berlin Alexanderplatz: The Story of Franz Biberkopf*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1997.

²¹ *M: Eine Stadte Sucht einen Moerder*. Dir. Fritz Lang. Nero Film AG, 1931. Film.

Fritz Lang and a shorter text by Kafka, this chapter will trace out how risk-fantasies are played out in the genre of mythic realism, and also how the perception and experience of risk-fantasies by the characters leads to certain kinds of shock and nervous illness that have both a supernatural dimension and a kind of contagiousness that does not require biological transmission. The expressionist tradition appears to resurrect notions of bodily possession by “spirits” or hypnotic manipulation, which raises questions as to how illnesses may be transmitted socially without needing a biological medium, a notion which clearly violates the rules of the germ theory of disease.

In Chapter 3, we will continue the discussion on the phenomena of bodily possession through healing techniques which engage the belief of the patient, indicating an entirely different figuration of the nature of the human body and how it combats illness. By examining different theories of the *milieu intérieur* within alternative approaches to medicine and health, this chapter will examine the ideological backdrop of different notions of disease causation and how they become imbricated within different modes of race thinking, racism and urban segregation. As we move on to focus on Los Angeles, we will examine how conceptions of health and illness and their ties to race were a central feature that contributed to the growth and settlement of the Los Angeles region. By promulgating Los Angeles both as a place with less germs and as place in which certain biological types of people could flourish, boosters created a real-estate economy based on the immigration of the wealthy, the sick and the WASP. This chapter will also examine how the entrenchment of urban segregation in Los Angeles is based on stigmatizing groups of people who resemble their living conditions too closely, even though these conditions were not

of their own making. In Polanski's *Chinatown*,²² it is possible to see how the stigma against the Chinese is used to perpetuate a corruption that is integral to organization and class structure of the city, even though the Chinese themselves have nothing to do with actual criminality. Lastly, we will examine Nathanael West's *Day of the Locust*²³ for its portrayal of the primitive, yet simultaneously mechanistic, crowd, and how this figure is an apocalyptic revelation of the quasi-fascist nature of the people who come to Los Angeles to find physical health, people who actually resemble empty automatons called into action by health dictators.

The fourth chapter is primarily a comparative analysis of central philosophical thematics within Frankfurt School thought, largely cultivated while its members were in exile in Los Angeles, and important tropes within the genre of film noir. This comparison in part asserts the importance of the Los Angeles imaginary for the Frankfurt School, as well as the importance of Weimar Berlin for the genre of film noir, and also how both the aesthetic and ethical domains of both spheres are linked together. By examining the trope of mimicry in nature (and its other incarnations as sympathetic magic) in Adornian thought, this chapter will emphasize how a resurgence of the mythical, or a "disenchantment of disenchantment," is the result of the mimicry of the products of statistical rationalization. I will also demonstrate how this logic of mimicry is an important trope in film noir classics such as *Double Indemnity* with the case of insurance fraud.²⁴ The last section of this chapter will examine the collaboration between Theodore Adorno and Thomas Mann on portions of Mann's *Doctor Faustus*,²⁵ and how the trope of mimicry in

²² *Chinatown*. Dir. Roman Polanski. Paramount Pictures, 1974. Film

²³ Nathaniel West. *Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust*. New York: New Directions, 1962.

²⁴ *Double Indemnity*. Dir. Billy Wilder. Paramount Pictures, 1944. Film.

²⁵ Thomas Mann. *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkühn as Told by a Friend*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992.

nature, and the main character's contraction of a disease characterized by mimicry, is envisioned as a method of musical composition, which may release cultural vitality from its objectified form.

The last chapter examines science fiction films and literature within a more "apocalyptic" genre in Southern California at the end of twentieth century, with a particular emphasis on themes of embodiment, possession, mimicry and an anxiety around urban infrastructure. In particular this chapter will address experiences of a transformation of self into other that have a geographical component. In Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*,²⁶ a novel of civilizational breakdown, the main character's hyperempathy syndrome, a disorder which compels her to mimic the pain of others, emphasizes how the fear of illness and contamination within insecure areas of the city may be transmitted phenomenologically. This section will also examine how when a crack in the infrastructure which sustains the separation of nature and culture in the city becomes visible, this unleashes a contagion of hybridity which is transmitted through a kind of mimicry of symptoms. The next section concerns Philip K. Dick's *Radio Free Albemuth*,²⁷ in which the main character learns through extraterrestrial radio transmissions that the entire urban environment of Southern California is really a mask which hides the malevolent presence of a sinister entity, the Iron Prison, which suppresses the true destiny of the human race. Nicolas Brady's transformation into an agent of divine righteousness is also coterminous with the apocalyptic revelation that the disenchanting spatiality of Southern California hides a mythical truth. The last text which will be addressed is the film *Nomads*,²⁸ which narrates the experience

²⁶ Octavia Butler. *Parable of the Sower*. New York: Time Warner International, 1998.

²⁷ Philip K. Dick. *Radio Free Albemuth*. New York: Avon Books, 1985.

²⁸ *Nomads*. Dir. John McTiernan. Cinema VII, 1986. Film

of a contagion in which individuals are forced to relive the traumatic histories of others, a contagion which is transmitted by spectral entities which haunt locales that carry a historical baggage of past calamity and injustice.

Chapter 1: The Emergence of Biosocial Intimacy in the Metropolis: Hygiene and History in early Twentieth Century Paris and Berlin

At the end of the nineteenth century, the pitfalls of industrialism and its human costs had become so overwhelming in the big cities of Europe and on America's eastern seaboard that health problems in the labor force were perceived as an obstacle which stood in the way of the demands of production. This tension between "health and wealth" is explored by Bruno Latour in his *The Pasteurization of France*²⁹ in which he clarifies how, at the time, human labor was seen as a great reservoir of energy to be plugged into and adapted by industrial forces. "The favorite metaphor of the time, the difference in potential, defined a vast energy source into which all actors of the period could plug themselves in...one that was commensurate to the social body itself." (18) For Latour, it is this field that became the object of industrial and urban hygienists, theorists and practitioners whose domains of analysis ranged from the personal to the infrastructural, and from physics to biology. The universalism of "hygienic thought" can be summed up in Latour's statement, "If anything can cause illness, nothing can be ignored; it is necessary to be able to act everywhere and on everything at once." (20) This indefinitely broad reach had, of course, the disadvantage of any truly robust efficacy, and was often still subject to eruptions of disease that suggested a "morbid spontaneity" that could not be prevented even with the most up-to-date hygienic techniques. However, another important aspect of Latour's claims is the demonstration of how just as often the new hygienic techniques were actually quite effective.

In many instances which, in spite of all hygienic preparations and standards, disease would appear despite the best of intentions. However,

²⁹ Bruno Latour. *The Pasteurization of France*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1988.

...this distortion does not always occur. A lot of beer arrives intact at the retailers; many of those who frequent whores do not become syphilitics; many midwives do not kill their clients' babies. It is precisely this variation that is disturbing. It is the impossibility of predicting the intervention, the parasitism, of other forces that makes the remedies and statistics of the hygienists both so meticulous and so discouraging...Indeed, the doctrine of 'morbid spontaneity' was the only really credible one. Between the act and the intention is a *tertium quid* that diverts and corrupts them, but is not always present, and we cannot capture it without taking everything into account at once.

(32)

This so-called *tertium quid* that may or may not be at work within a given network is an indefinite presence which was deemed responsible for the emergence of disease. While before the discoveries of bacteriology this entity was often conceived as a morbid spontaneity, cropping up in human populations without warning, it also was associated with the social body as a whole, in that one factor streams out across the network, but in the process deviates or becomes corrupted in some way by the medium in which it travels. This picture grants an agency of sorts to the collectivity itself, in that the perversions of intentions and actions seem to stem from no identifiable source, but rather from the entirety of interconnected relations within a population—which can result in spiritualizing and fetishizing the agency of the collective.

Latour demonstrates that the discovery of the microbe entailed a veritable explosion of other life-forms onto the social scene (even though they were always-already there) that humans had to acknowledge their intimacy with, making up part of the social body, as well as their own individual bodies. "When we speak of men, societies, culture, and objects, there are everywhere crowds of other agents that act, pursue aims unknown to us, and use us to prosper. We may inspect pure water, milk, hands, curtain sputum, the air we breathe, and see nothing suspect, but millions of other individuals are moving around that we cannot see." (35) What the discovery of

this invisible universe did was to bring the fetishistic power of collective agency out of abstraction and focus it on the concrete relations and infrastructure within a population center, the joints and ligaments of the social body, which may also be the medium for the transference of microscopic agents who have other sets of objectives. In other words, because the actual culprits behind disease outbreaks were invisible to the naked eye, hygiene as a force and ideology became wildly strengthened, which entailed that the medium upon which infectious agents travel and reproduce was in turn perceived as the source of danger even though it is actually the mere substrate upon which the danger is conveyed. In this manner, the discovery of microbe had the effect of imbuing the social/infrastructural complex in larger urban agglomerations with the spectral threats of illness and death.

However, while the metropolitan social-infrastructural complex was the source of potential illness, it was also the network, or collection of networks, that sustained life in the urban environment. Therefore, in the urban imaginary, social/infrastructural networks became the sites of mass anxiety and simultaneously an indispensable part of the means of subsistence for large population aggregates. Hygiene, and its practitioners, therefore, became the voice which could conjure the “good side” of the Janus-face of the metropolis, meaning that wherever the semiotics of urban hygiene were visible, urban inhabitants could experience relief from spectral dangers. This is how the field of hygiene reached such heights at the turn of the century, a field which Latour also clearly demonstrates to be essential in bacteriology’s hegemonic triumph within the medical sciences. For Latour, the historical nexus between hygiene and the bacteriology allowed both to become titanic forces in urban public health. Hygiene had the peculiar range and universality that as a concept it could apply to the miniature orders of

microscopic, biochemical interactions, and yet still be extrapolated to refer to the larger, molar modalities and infrastructure within macro-social organizations. This potentially universal scope of hygiene raises the question, however, as to whether it could ever become completely effective.

The coupling of the hygienist movements in mid-nineteenth century Europe and the discovery of the microbe brought about a paradigm revolution in the conception and structuring of human dwelling, community, and co-existence. The emergence of the microbe onto the scene also had contradictory effects upon general conceptions of illness and contagion. On the one hand, the microbe is the distinct localization of a phenomenon that may cover a vast amount of territory. On the other hand, this localization of generalized phenomena finds its basic unit in the microscopic, which is, for all intents and purposes, invisible without medico-technological assistance (microscopes, training in medicine and biology). This process is contradictory because it entails that the localization of an affliction is also the tacit acknowledgement that complete localization (and eventual containment) of the phenomenon may not be possible. As Foucault writes, "...the result is that the disease no longer appears in the solid relationship of the prevailing disease to its place or milieu, but as a distribution of cases in a population circumscribed in time or space. Consequently, the notion of case appears, which is not the individual case, but a way of individualizing the collective phenomena of the disease, or of collectivizing the phenomena, integrating individual phenomena within a collective field, but in the form of quantification of the rational and identifiable."³⁰ Thus, the very security which localization and identification should bring, may also generate a radical insecurity, an insecurity possibly greater to the enlightened mind than a pre-enlightenment belief in the embodiment of "sick" individuals by

³⁰ Foucault, Michel. *Security, Territory, Population*. New York: Picador, 2007. p.60

evil spirits. The recognition of this insecurity has a traumatic character, due to the fact, that regardless of ones motives, actions or disposition, everyone is potentially always-already infected. And it is also in this space of traumatic recognition *within* the safe parameters established by the dominant scientific paradigm that some of the more monstrous fictions of the twentieth century were capable of incubation.

This dual character of safety and insecurity inherent to the bacteriological paradigm points toward a spectral quality within the experience of biosocial intimacy due to the fact that the sphere of commingling microbiological life forms that generates biological interconnectivity across a vast social landscape cannot be effectively represented through empirical and scientific frameworks (although these forms of knowledge are absolutely essential in the legitimating of the category of biosociality.) The reason why I invoke the term “spectral” here is because the ontological consistency of such a phenomenon, namely the large-scale interconnectivity of biological life forms, can only be demonstrated at the isolated level of the individual case that may then be generalized to the rest of the territory. Thus, the entirety of a biosocial network can only be postulated, but not entirely confirmed (except in cases of epidemics in which the lines of flight of pathogens draw their maps upon the substrate of an agglomeration, but even here, this can only present an incomplete picture of all the variables involved in biological interconnectivity). Thus, I say spectral not because such a sphere is purely fictive, or the product of a collective hallucination, but because such a sphere is essentially *part-fictive*, calling upon the imaginative powers of the human subject to grant such a postulation ontological gravity, or an *existence* if you will.

Thus, late nineteenth century approaches toward contagion and the microbe involve an essentially poetic act of conjuring the images for the collective inhabiting of a biological environment, images that, although they do nothing to change the facts of interconnectivity, are certainly a mode of knowledge whose figures make such interconnectivity visible and conceptually available. However, what is interesting about such depictions of biosocial intimacy and modalities of contagion is that their representations in literature, film, politics, and mass media tend to appear also as if they were a hallucination on the part of the author or architect, a hallucination that appears to be the very product of an infection, of being taken over or enthralled by impressions of collective life. To sum up, *it appears as if figurations of the social body are themselves the products of illness, of an unnamed illness transmitted to the subject through that very same social body*. Such figurations are the imaginative traces of a biological uncanny that evokes a pre-history of shamanistic possession in which the useful vision of the seer is the result of his blurring into indistinction with natural processes. Figurations of biosociality convey the uncanny resurgence of this prehistoric cosmology in their mode of presencing, as well as the symptoms of a disease whose origin and locale within the body cannot be determined, exhausting the powers of the scientific paradigm in ascribing etiology.

In order to track the rise of this historically new experience of biosocial intimacy, it seems that one of the more common characteristics found within works of literature which address and construct this experience is the narrative perspective of the stranger or foreigner, and of unfamiliarity. In many ways Paris must really be seen as the prototypical place in which this encounter with unfamiliarity found its earlier poetic expressions in western Europe, even though many narrators were native to the city. The thematics which arose from metropolitan literature

about Paris became central features and problematics of the 20th century, even though the theatre in which these themes developed and mutated were in other places, namely Berlin and Los Angeles for the purposes of this study. By way of introduction, I would like to place Benjamin and Rilke in dialogue with one another in regards to their impressions of Paris, and how these thematics are figured within this early 20th century literature. It is this thematic core, developed initially in Paris, that grounds what I think could be considered a important sub-genre in the domain of metropolitan literature, a genre which I will call mythic realism, and whose content will be played out in powerful ways in the other two cities.



Rilke in Paris: Intimacy with the Unfamiliar and the Sacred Metaphysics of the Metropolis

Rainer Maria Rilke's one and only novel of poetic prose, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*,³¹ commences with fragmentary impressions gathered from the Parisian street within a haze of humid summer heat, a street that first rises up to confront the narrator in its olfactory guise: as a seemingly unpleasant mixture of iodoform, the grease of pommes frites and *fear*. While this fear is first noted as a vague, faint aura around the features of the urban landscape, two pages further in, Malte, the aristocrat-cum-flaneur, confesses that it is also *he* who is afraid. "I am afraid. One must take some action against fear, once one has come down with it. It would be horrible to get sick here, and if someone thought of taking me to the Hotel-Dieu, I would certainly die there." (7) At the outset of this long narrative, Malte confides that he is essentially afraid of becoming ill, but also that this fear could become an illness in its own right, one caught

³¹ Rainer Maria Rilke. *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

by breathing in its vapors from the streets, that could lead to his death. Part of what seems to trouble him is that dying in such a place, which he describes as a “factory death” in which “each individual death is not made so carefully,” produces a death that no longer belongs to the individual, or in his words: “...(for since all sicknesses are well known, it is also known that the various fatal endings belong to the sicknesses and not the people.)” (9) What was previously the ultimate and final personal experience is now, thanks to advances in the medical sciences and the urban hospital system, something which belongs to external, and practically invisible, causes. This telling statement alerts us to the particular historical situation in which our main character finds himself, one in which all illnesses have become “known,” a situation which has somehow left the afflicted individual bereft of the ownership of his own symptoms, including the ultimate symptom—death. This suggests to us partially what Malte is afraid of, a dispossession of his own life-process by other forces, and the technicians which administer to them, suggesting that having a disease *with a name* is first step in a process of spiritual bankruptcy.

At the turn of the 20th century, Malte’s initial impression of his environment is one of disenchantment, in that the big city, with the factory as its underlying metaphor, has taken everything sacred out of individual experience. But very quickly, it becomes evident that within the disenchanted order of the metropolis, quite another kind of sacred experience was available to those who lacked the means to avoid it or to those sensitive enough to be touched by it. This rupture within the disenchanted urban system may occur through an experience of illness, but of a kind of illness that stubbornly refuses to be pigeon-holed as either originating from inside or outside the individual. This undecidability in Malte’s illness is also intimately connected to his encounters with urban poverty and the abject conditions in which the lower classes must live.

This declassed Danish aristocrat has found himself impoverished and alone in metropolitan Paris, without ancestral possessions and without his dogs, unable to completely distinguish himself from the ranks of the poverty-stricken. Malte experiences the loss of a strictly defined identity through various experiences of empathic identification (experiences, however, which he did not intend to have, and that began to happen without his full consent) with individuals who seem to be left voiceless within larger historical processes, or as Eric Santner refers to them, “those who are included but who do not count.” Santner’s analysis in the preface to his work *On Creaturely Life* addresses how Malte’s poetic project sees in these dispossessed individuals the opportunity to write another history, grounded in the materiality and perspectives of those who find themselves without a true home in the present or in its eventual historical record. It is this “creaturely” dimension, according to Santner, which is central to exceptional states of human being that is also often without its own history or sociological categories.³²

The homeless condition³³ that is described in Rilke’s poetic narrative encompasses much more than the fact of lacking typical domestic quarters. Rather, this condition is characterized by a relationship to objects and living spaces that must necessarily come into contact with the traces of other people’s lives. For these individuals and families living in the poorer ghetto districts of the city do not have access to objects first-hand; everything they possess is at least second-hand, if not fifth-hand.³⁴ The sheer materiality of their circumstances, on the one hand, expresses a

³² Eric Santner. *On Creaturely Life*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006.

³³ In existentialist philosophy the notion of homelessness provided a means of addressing the existential state of *Geworfenheit* (or the state of being thrown into the world) as an *a priori* category within consciousness, a state of consciousness treated in detail in Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1962. and Jean-Paul Sartre. *Being and Nothingness*. New York: Pocket Books, 1956.

³⁴ For a discussion of the erosion of the “home” and its sphere of stable objects, see Frederick Garber. “Time and the City in Rilke’s *Malte Laurids Brigge*.” *Contemporary Literature*. 3. (1970), pp. 324-339

strange relationship to everyday history that neither the people of wealthier classes nor historians have access to, while on the other, is also characterized by an unhygienic norm that places them into more obvious semiotic proximity to a socio-microbiological environment that other classes may more easily attempt to distance themselves from. This representation of the urban downtrodden in Rilke's text posits an interesting relationship between hygiene, history and a political-economic system which generates social contradictions in metropolitan space. The fact that his main character will attempt to assemble his poetic project out of the raw material of this nexus, forgoing his previous wish to be among the ranks of more aristocratic, metaphysical poets, suggests a displacement of a poetics based in a "sacred" metaphysics of the countryside—a poetics, although secular in nature, that attempts to concretize sacred spiritual dimensions of being, natural and human, in the Romantic sense of granting artistic form to the Sublime—and a movement toward a poetics of the metropolis in which an entirely different metaphysics obtains.

During his wanderings through the streets of Paris, we find a recurrent wish on Malte's part to be a poet safely nestled within the stable atmosphere of his own home. "But it is another poet I am reading, quite another, one who does not live in Paris; one who has a quiet home in the mountains. He rings like a bell in clean air. A happy poet who tells of his window and the glass doors of his bookcase, that pensively reflect a favourite lonely view. This poet it is that I should have liked to become..."³⁵ This description of Malte's poet ideal emphasizes, at each turn, the absence of others. The poet's "quiet home" allows him to "ring like a bell in clean air," without the noises of others to interfere in his self-reflection. His "lonely view" is one which is not seen by others, and this unique perspective is what Malte romanticizes to be the precondition of

³⁵ Rainer Maria Rilke. *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990. p.39

poetry. The poet who sits and translates his own intimate universe into something legible for all; this is what Malte lacks precisely because his intimate universe is populated by others. “Oh, what a happy fate to sit in the quiet room of an ancestral house, surrounded by calm, sedentary things...I would have lived there with my ancient possessions, my family portraits and my books...But things have fallen otherwise... My old furniture is rotting in a barn where I have been allowed to put it, while I myself...have no roof over me and the rain is driving into my eyes.” (40-41) It seems as though Malte’s world in Paris is one in which objects are not “sedentary,” but rather are, in their own way, active, or are at least evocative of the lives of others who once animated them.³⁶ Even though ancestral possessions do also convey a bygone life, namely that of ancestors, the family is already to such a degree woven into the fabric of one’s identity that this kind of possession—in the dual sense of being “possessed” and possessing—actually helps establish one’s place within a larger global history, keeping at bay a threat of dissolution or anonymity (the family bears a *Name* which survives generations of time). Without this kind of ancestral insulation or the wherewithal to construct his own, we find Malte subject to the vicissitudes of identification with an abstract collective, an experience which, it turns out, actually enables his poetic project.

Malte’s entire world of possessions carries the traces of others’ lives. His room and the furniture within it are both rented. “I am sitting and thinking: if I were not so poor I should rent another room with furniture that isn’t so worn out and full of former tenants as this furniture is...

³⁶ Malte addresses the sovereign animation of the object world further on the narrative: “For centuries now, Things have been looking on at this. It’s no wonder that they are corrupted, that they lose their taste for their natural, silent functions and want to take advantage of existence, the way they see it being taken advantage of all around them. They make attempts to evade their duties; they grow listless and negligent, and people are not at all surprised when they catch Things red-handed in some scandalous situation.” (183)

At first it really cost me an effort to lean my head on this arm-chair; for there is, in its green covering, a greasy grey hollow, into which all heads seem to fit.” (49) Here, Malte declares forthrightly that his lack of material wealth forces him to live amidst the impressions of others—literally. The impression in his armchair made from the nameless heads of people who no longer live there is an indentation in which “all heads seem to fit,” meaning that these impressions and their substrate are somehow universal in nature. He goes on to say, after explaining how he at one time placed a handkerchief between his head and the chair, “...I have discovered that it’s all right the way it is and that the small hollow fits the back of my head perfectly, as if it had been custom-made.” (49) In this instance, we see that Malte’s surroundings are not his own and that while they seem to accommodate anyone, they somehow are also tailored particularly to him. Or, is it rather that his environment has begun to tailor Malte to its own nature? Some protective layer which would normally exist between Malte and his surroundings is absent or in the process of erosion, but what replaces this barrier, living in its stead, seems to be a kind of viscous substance that carries the traces, refuse and vapors of the dejected masses of people and their forgotten lives. This “slimy” substance records the unwanted life of an underclass that Malte is slowly losing his distance from, whose streets rushed toward him in a “viscid flood of humanity” (46). The impressions which avail themselves to him have a pre-established intimacy with his own internal life, even though he has little to no experiential correlate. This experience of intimacy with the unfamiliar forms the basis of his poetic, literary endeavor, suggesting that his intimate relations with objects consist in a kind of mediation which he cannot entirely control.

Malte's descriptions of the urban downtrodden increasingly take on abject terms, as he works to mentally distance himself from them. "For it's obvious they are outcasts, not just beggars; no, they are really not beggars, there is a difference. They are human trash, husks of men that fate has spewed out. Wet with the spittle of fate, they stick to a wall, a lamp-post, a billboard, or they trickle down the street, leaving a dark, filthy trail behind them." (40) In the German original "trash" appears as *Abfall*, which essentially means "waste" in the sense of "that which has fallen out." The notion of *Abfall* is extremely important in Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history because in a history written by the victors, the *Abfall der Geschichte* (the trash or "fall-outs" of history with a capital "H") may provide a means of disruption to a narrative—when discovered, if at all—which sutures together a history that is devoid of the voices of resistance to domination. That which has been "left-out" of the historical account also has the capacity, when it emerges, to challenge the norms which that history sustains. This suggests a secret power within histories that are not accounted for, but which nonetheless are at least partly responsible for the composition of the world as we know it. In this passage, Malte associates the urban poor with a slimy substance that evokes sickness and death. However, their existence may also be seen as something closer to a "general life-process," in that they are "wet with the spittle of fate." While abject and unhygienic, these individuals appear to be in a direct relationship with "mythical" forces like fate, indicating that within the unhygienic, one may actually approach a more sacred dimension of metropolitan communal being.

In Mary Douglas' classic, *Purity and Danger*³⁷ she skillfully overturns the association between hygiene and ritual in primitive religion, as the previous anthropological viewpoint was

³⁷ Mary Douglas. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London and New York: Routledge, 1991.

that most religious acts within premodern communities also possessed a hygienic logic of their own which was to purify the sacred from the profane. While she does demonstrate a litany of behaviors that seem to have a hygienic component within primitive peoples, there are plenty of instances in which the logical extension of certain acts of purification do not make sense from a hygienic perspective. But the revelation that she points to is that that which is considered to be sacred or holy can also be conceived as something contaminating, and thus, many ritual habits are there to *protect individuals from holy contamination*. “...the universe is divided between things and actions which are subject to restriction and others which are not; among the restrictions some are intended to protect divinity from profanation, and others to protect the profane from the dangerous intrusion of divinity. Sacred rules are just merely rules hedging divinity off, and uncleanness is the two-way danger of contact with divinity...the Latin word *sacer* itself has this meaning of restriction through pertaining to the gods. And in some cases it may apply to desecration as well as to consecration.” (18) Thus, it appears from this anthropological standpoint that ritualized practice often associates divinity with something contagious that members of the community need to be distanced from. Ritualized habits often have their basis in the *prevention* of divine experience for those not initiated for such contact. The sacred actions of shamans are performed in a zone cordoned off from the profane world, in which they may open themselves to holy contamination in the service of the community as a whole without contaminating this community. This anthropological insight suggests that in the secularized urban environment, the experience of the unclean and the unhygienic may still have an open channel to the sacred forces underpinning rationalized society.

However, while Malte at times is fascinated by sacred experiences of communal being, there are plenty of other moments when he desires a sanctuary from this proximity to the urban poor and the unhygienic. “Who are these people? What do they want of me? Are they waiting for me? How do they recognize me? It’s true that my beard looks somewhat neglected and very, very slightly resembles their own sick, faded beards, which have always made a deep impression on me. But don’t I have the right to neglect my beard? Many busy men do that, and no one ever thinks of numbering them, for that reason, among the outcasts.”³⁸ After these encounters on the streets, we see that Malte is also relieved to possess a card that grants him access to the Bibliothèque Nationale where he may enter the landscapes fashioned by his favorite poet. Here, behind these library walls he receives a simulation of a private insulated environment. “...but finally I stand before a glass door, open as if I were at home, show my card at the next door (just exactly as you show me your things, only with the difference that people understand me and know what I mean—), and then I am among these books, am withdrawn from you as though I were dead...” (39) Malte’s possession of the legible signifiers of access allows him the brief respite from the intensity of the streets, but this simulated home is made up of the substance of verse, out of the distilled experience of someone else. This kind of artificial exit from life on the streets is for him a withdrawal that is akin to death. On a certain level, Malte knows that the kind of insulation provided by bourgeois society and its universe of codified class signifiers is more similar to an embalming fluid which preserves a corpse from rot.

³⁸ Rainer Maria Rilke. *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990. p.40



A picture of the reading room of the Bibliothèque Nationale. retrieved from <<http://tuesday-johnson.tumblr.com/post/4213001849/the-reading-room-of-the-bibliotheque-nationale-de>>

This particular building, the Bibliothèque Nationale, in which Malte enjoys respite from the streets, is representative of the massive changes which Paris underwent during Hausmannization³⁹ in the 1860's. The architect, Henri Labrouste, who constructed the reading room of the library, where, assumedly, Malte could be found reading his favorite poet, was educated in the *École des Beaux Arts*, a school which emphasized the revival and preservation of styles of classical antiquity. This building is a monumental building *par excellence*, located on the Rue de Richelieu that boasted an enormous width for pedestrian promenades even prior to Haussmann's Grand Boulevards campaign, which fundamentally altered the character of Paris

³⁹ See Walter Benjamin. *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999.

forever. Thus, it is important to recognize that the site in which Malte seeks refuge from a contagious domain of metropolitan life in Paris is one which claims to carry with it a great ancestral history, still preserved somehow in the structure itself. This building appears to be one of the few locations where Malte experiences security and insulation in the metropolis, a location which apparently does not allow the homeless inside. Malte feels safe in this sanitized environment, and it is interesting to note that the aesthetic expression of security and sanitization is here conveyed in the nostalgic packaging of monumental history (a history which we will later demonstrate to be one which often sacrifices the vitality of its own content in the act of preservation.)

In stark contrast to the manicured surfaces of monumental architecture which claim to preserve the greater history of the community, we have Malte's observation of the bared wall of a residential building, the rest of which had already been demolished, down an alley in a poorer district of the city. Malte's observations of the no-longer-existent interiors of lower-class buildings through their traces in this inner-city ruin present what could be considered a counter-history to the monumental history of metropolitan Paris. These leftovers are riddled with the marks of generations who lived within them. "The stubborn life of these rooms had not allowed itself to be trampled out. It was still there; it clung to the nails that had been left in the walls; it found a resting-place on the remaining handsbreadth of flooring; it squatted beneath the corner beams where a little bit of space remained..." (44) How does Malte see the traces of past lives covering these rooms? He does not skip over any features of these areas with his penetrating gaze, but rather looks beyond them as if he already had some kind of privileged access to these forgotten regions of history.

And from these walls once blue, and green and yellow, framed by the tracks of disturbed partitions, the breath of these lives came forth—the clammy, sluggish, fusty breath, which no wind had yet scattered. There were the midday meals and the sicknesses and the exhalations and the smoke of years, and the sweat that breaks out under the armpits and makes garments heavy, and the stale breath of mouths, and the oily odor of perspiring feet. There were the pungent tang of urine and the stench of burning soot and the grey reek of potatoes, and the heavy, sickly fumes of rancid grease. The sweetish lingering smell of neglected infants was there, and the smell of frightened children who go to school, and the stuffiness of beds of nubile youths. To these was added much that had risen from the pit of the reeking street below, and more that oozed down from above with the rain, which over cities is not clean...I said, did I not, that all the walls had been demolished except the last—? It is of this wall that I have been speaking all along. One would think that I had stood a long time before it; but I can swear that I began to run as soon as I had recognized it. For that is a terrible thing that I did recognize it. I recognize everything here, and that is why it takes immediate possession of me: it is quite at home in me. (47-48)

At the end of this passage, Malte makes it quite clear that these observations and impressions do not arise out of careful perusal and analysis of his environment.⁴⁰ Rather, he receives them while running away in fear from this dilapidated remainder of urban infrastructure. This intimacy with the utterly unfamiliar indicates that an unknown substance, a hidden historical archive of forgotten generations that records and imprints the lives of individuals who have otherwise been entirely overlooked, is actually present within him. The substance, which “takes immediate possession” of him and is “quite at home” in him, replaces the same kind of insulation which one fashions out of his house and possessions, but it is more universal in nature. The substance, and the elements it delivers, is like home for Malte, but this home is not private. It is inherently social, a shared substance which does not mask the presence of others within one’s own intimate

⁴⁰ Eric Santner also analyzes this passage with an eye for trauma and the spectral: “...the excitations in question in this ‘attunement’ pertain to something spectral, to trace of life no longer there, which for that very reason seems to have acquired a more radical and disturbing quality of ‘thereness’ whose impact is experienced as traumatic.” (51)

sphere. Malte does not simply register the stench of neglected children and the sweaty armpits of dead people, he finds that these “impressions” seem to arise as if from within himself, or rather that what he considers “himself” may actually originate out of this social substance.



La Salpêtrière à Paris. Source : H. Gourdon de Genouillac. *Paris à travers les siècles*. Paris, 1882.

One can see how such a strange illness might have proven difficult to explain to a physician, but as Malte claimed, this did not prevent them from prescribing treatment. “The doctor didn’t understand me. At all. And certainly my case was difficult to describe. They wanted to try electrotherapy. Good. I was given a slip of paper: at one o’clock I was supposed to be at

the Salpêtrière.” (54) But it was within this institution,⁴¹ the site of the famous exploits in the study of hysteria by the neurologist Charcot,⁴² that Malte’s illness seemed to become much worse, and began to resurrect the horrific hallucinations he had witnessed as a child while sick with fever. Here, we begin to see the transition from his recognition of an unfamiliar world to his absorption by this very world. His capacity to reach poetic intimacy with the forgotten lives of others is also the same susceptibility to a larger social body, which demands not only his attention, but also his own biological faculties:

Now it was there. Now it was growing out of me like a tumor, like a second head, and was a part of me, although it certainly wouldn’t belong to me because it was so big. It was there like a large dead animal which, while it was alive used to be my hand or my arm. And my blood flowed through me and through it, as through one and the same body. And my heart had to beat harder to pump the blood into the Big Thing: there was barely enough blood. And the blood entered the Big Thing unwillingly and came back sick and tainted. But the Big Thing swelled and grew over my face like a warm bluish boil, and grew over my mouth, and already my last eye was hidden by its shadow. (61-62)

Malte’s figuration of this other living body to which he finds himself vitally connected is framed here in parasitic terms, as something which uses his own biological substances, but that does not

⁴¹ See Paul Lerner. *Hysterical Men*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003. “His Salpetriere hospital on the outskirts of Paris became the site for some of the most important developments in the history of hysteria, hypnosis and traumatic neurosis. In 1882, at Charcot’s behest, the Salpetriere added a section for men, whereas the historian Mark Micale has written, cases of male hysteria became a daily diagnostic reality.” (25)

⁴² See Sander L. Gilman, Helen King, Roy Porter, G. S. Rousseau, and Elaine Showalter *Hysteria Beyond Freud*. Berkeley: University of California Press, c1993 1993. <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft0p3003d3/> and Lerner, Paul. *Hysterical Men*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003. In Lerner’s book he discusses the essential contributions of Charcot as the attempt to bring the nervous ailment of hysteria into a positivistic etiological framework. “The fascination he continues to hold for historians derives in no small part from his investigations into the disease and his (ultimately failed) attempts to force its elusive and mysterious manifestations into his positivist paradigm. Using his formidable powers of observation and aided by the camera, over the 1870’s and 1880’s, the so-called ‘Napoleon of the neuroses’ sought to document the disease’s stages and states, clinging to the conviction that hysteria was a real, timeless disorder with objective clinical symptoms.” (26)

belong to him. This passage, if taken on its own, reveals a recurrent fantasy found in various science fiction narratives of embodiment, which hint at a “borg-like” integration of one’s vitality into a larger collective organism, whose intentions remain impossible to grasp. The figuration of this living entity, however, in this case, is not described as some visitation of a foreign or extra-terrestrial presence, but rather as something already there, proper to the human civilization in question. I would like to argue that this dimension of human community may be understood as a traumatic appearance of collective life which underpins the historical process, a collective life which takes on new figurations because of a new secular paradigm of biology and medicine. In other instantiations, this same social substance will be figured as foreign entity with sinister designs that is usually ascribed to the presence of immigrants and racial groups excluded from full participation in the community.

What Rilke’s text reveals is a greater affinity between a general substance of human community and being and this realm of socio-microbiology, which, although invisible, is a material manifestation of a community’s physical inter-connectedness and interdependency. However, for Malte, the cost of coming into contact with this overpowering social substance is for him to be contaminated by it, to feel infected by it, and to lose the stable parameters of his identity in the face of it. Although, this contamination, along with the agents that may have caused it, remains impenetrable to medical technology, and thus appears as fantastical and hallucinatory to those who do not experience it. Thus, from the experience of Malte, we see that the experience of this “sacred” (as both unclean and transcendent) social substance is also moment of contact with something contagious, an experience that in an overall sense represents the experience of social intimacy across various identity boundaries as something which makes

one vulnerable to illness. In other words, *the experience of bio-social intimacy is the experience of contagion, of transmissibility itself—the capacity to be transformed, occupied and possessed by an invisible dimension that is foundational to human community.*

The significance of the theme of illness also appears in the text as a fascination with childhood illnesses or the return thereof. This topic returns in various parts of the narrative. Why is the notion of the childhood illness so important to him? It may be here that we must move a bit outside of the sphere of literature to investigate this. According to the writings of William McNeil, who wrote *Plagues and Peoples*,⁴³ what have come to be known now as childhood diseases have had an extremely important role in the evolutionary development and survival of certain human genetic populations, especially in Europe. The clustering of groups of people into larger civilizational units beyond a few thousand people automatically entailed a greater susceptibility to and a heightened transmission of various kinds of microbial infection. While certain diseases may have been fatal to other individuals outside of a given civilization, for those within, the experience and survival of them were often a necessary stage in assuring one's place in that civilization, by guaranteeing that one was immunologically of the same stock. Thus, the experience of the childhood illness represents an early rite of passage which occurs before the child may even understand its anthropological gravity. However, the significance of a return of a childhood illness suggests the same precariousness of being simultaneously inside and outside of a biological community, but in this case, with a self-consciousness during the experience that cannot be suppressed, especially when Malte has no parent, friend or lover to protect him from the psychological weight of this precariousness.

⁴³ William McNeill. *Plagues and Peoples*. New York: Anchor Books, 1976

The kinds of debilitating effects from such an experience with an undefined illness manifest in such a way for Malte that he seems to have lost his place and way within a set of circumstances that at one point were relatively familiar. It is as if he finds himself ejected from prominent idioms of social life, as well as a normative understanding of his own motor control. “Then I began to walk down one street, and other streets came that I had never seen before, and still others. Electric trolleys, too brightly lit, raced up and past, their harsh bells clanging into the distance. But on their signboards were names I couldn’t recognize. I didn’t know what city I was in, or whether I had a room somewhere, or what I had to do so that I could stop walking.”⁴⁴ In this case, Malte’s battle with a nebulous illness serves to remove him from the most basic points of self-recognition within a larger urban community, namely, place of residence, geographical orientation, semiotic orientation within the sign system, and finally, motor control. This experience of the metropolis seems one that can be easily transposed onto other contexts, namely Berlin. The jarring effects of an electrified city, existing at a pace and rhythm previously inconceivable, in this case, disturb the recognition of place and dwelling, along with how one should command oneself in the environment. This loss of orientation makes one feel outside of the usual categories that he or she may have identified with, and in Malte’s case suggests that there are other individuals in the city, particularly associated with immigrants and the urban poor, who may live in this state permanently.

Thus, Malte’s fear can be connected to what may be called a transformation of self into other, and the feeling that the other is somehow causing this transformation by sheer proximity.

Malte continues:

⁴⁴ Rainer Maria Rilke. *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990. p. 62

And now this illness again, which has always affected me so strangely. I'm sure it is underestimated. Just as the importance of other illnesses is exaggerated. This illness doesn't have any particular characteristics; it takes on the characteristics of the people it attacks. With the confidence of a sleepwalker, it pulls out there deepest danger, which seemed passed, and places it before them again, very near, imminent. Men who once, in their schooldays, tried the helpless vice that has as its duped partner the poor, hard hands of boys, find themselves doing it again; or an illness they had overcome when they were children begins again inside them; or a lost habit reappears, a certain hesitating turn of the head that was characteristic of them years before. And with what comes, a whole tangle of confused memories arises, hanging from it like a wet seaweed on a sunken boat. Lives that you would never have known about bob to the surface and mingle with what really happened, and drive out a past you thought you knew: for in what rises there is a new, rested strength, while what was always there is tired out from too much remembrance.

(62-63)

Part of what is interesting about Malte's depiction of this strange illness is its power to conjure an alternative history, a history which emerges with a "new, rested strength," displacing a history that has been "tired out from too much remembrance." This illness is also one which has no qualities in and of itself, but rather takes on those of whom it attacks. However, that which it takes on are not characteristics of the individual's present life; instead, this illness dredges up character features that were thought to have been expunged or repressed (such as "lost habits" or "childhood illnesses.") This illness seems to be one concerned with the resurrection of lost histories that did not find their way into the current constitution of the individual, but also, their content encompasses what could be referred to as a realm of abnormality that is not sanctioned by the social order (in this case, masturbation, nervous habits and childhood illness). This "nachträglich" appearance of abnormal experience and behavior indicates that a great deal of what actually composes collective life will either be shunned, ignored or purged from the annals

of communal self-understanding—history. In other words, the parapraxes, the nervous twitches which surge beneath the threshold of self-awareness are also to be found within the canvas of a larger communal history, but by virtue of their unconscious character, they cannot be acknowledged for the work they do, quietly standing-in for possibilities of how life could be organized.

One of the most famous scenes in the novel is Malte's encounter with the "tripping old man" in which he witnesses a man's habit of constantly tripping on something in the street again and again, while being simultaneously unable to prevent his own collar from bulging out.

"...in his busy hands there were two distinct movements: one a quick, secret movement that flipped up the collar, while the other one, elaborate, prolonged, exaggeratedly spelled out was meant to fold it back down. This observation disconcerted me so greatly that two minutes passed before I recognized in the man's neck, behind his hunched-up coat and his nervously scrambling hands, the same horrible, bisyllabic hopping that had just left his legs. From this moment I was bound to him. I saw that the hopping was wandering through his body, trying to break out here or there...A cold twinge shot down my spine when his legs suddenly made a small, convulsive leap; but no one had seen it, and I decided that I would also trip slightly if anyone began to look. That would certainly be a way of making them think there had been some small imperceptible object on the sidewalk, which both of us had happened to step on." (68)

While Malte mentions earlier that even the man himself believes in the presence of the invisible object, Malte goes as far to pretend that it exists by simulating the strange habit of the old man "if anyone began to look." Whatever urge or action was coursing through the man's body and nervous constitution did so without being detected by the man himself, except as some invisible object outside of him, which interfered with his motor-control. The ontology of such a parapraxis or "nervous tick" is firstly, of course, a shocking instance of self-defeat and a tragic display of a process that is structurally veiled from its executioner; however, this nervous tick, or immanent

“hopping” which needed an outlet, also becomes something quite different after Malte decides that he would simulate it if he had to in order to protect the man from public exposure. This entails the mimicry of parapraxis in others, a mimicry of a host of actions which accrue within every person’s unconscious archive of his or her own activity and history; although, this section of the archive is for some reason off-limits to its owner. But not to Malte; he receives immediate access to this sphere of unconscious action in others, and somehow in the process, it becomes part of him or is already so.

Malte’s empathic experience of the tripping man increased as he followed the man to the point where he became increasingly anxious. “But I couldn’t keep my anxiety from growing. I knew that as he walked and with infinite effort tried to appear calm and detached, the terrible spasms were accumulating inside his body; I could feel the anxiety *he* felt as the spasms grew and grew...” (69) Malte’s own feelings of anxiety are not only connected with the man’s anxieties; they are also connected to the spasms themselves, as if he could sense them directly. In certain sense, Malte’s own illness can be characterized by various kinds of mimicry, such as in his intimate understanding of the man’s involuntary behavior. But it also seems that the way his own illness is transferred to him is generally through an empathic identification with others, whether it be the street poor, the children getting shock treatment in the Salpêtrière or this twitching old man.

When describing the invisible agents that cause his experiences, he references both the tropes of microscopic infection and lost histories. “The existence of the horrible in every atom of air. You breathe it in as something transparent; but inside you it condenses, hardens, takes on pointed, geometric shapes between your organs; for all the torture-chambers, madhouses,

operating rooms, under bridges in late autumn: all this has a stubborn permanence, all this endures in itself and, jealous of everything that is, clings to its own dreadful reality.” (73) This description sketches out an emotional state that is characterized by both a sensation of infection, in which toxic particles from the metropolitan street enter his body, as well as by an affliction that takes the form of lost histories that are on the verge of disappearing and which are, like ghosts and specters, “jealous of everything that is,” a collection of nameless acts associated with the brutality of modern infrastructure. These flitting images of lost histories in the metropolis come together for him into panic-ridden experiences of undecidable illness and as moments of *shock*, whose symptoms are experienced as a strange intimacy with the forgotten details of the lives of an historically dejected population. However, in order to make sense of these instances of shock and the emergence of lost history, it will be important to analyze some key texts from Walter Benjamin.



Towards a Dialectic of Shock and Insulation

In his essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,”⁴⁵ Walter Benjamin traced a shift in the general mode of perception associated with metropolitan experience, emphasizing a new necessity for the management and filtration of increasing amounts of urban stimuli. In the Baudelaire essay (informed in many ways by his childhood experiences in Berlin, which he reflected upon in his *Berliner Kindheit*),⁴⁶ he acquaints us with the emergence of an aesthetic experience defined by *shock*, as opposed to one defined by the *aura* of “great works” of art. For

⁴⁵ Walter Benjamin. *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 1989.

⁴⁶ Walter Benjamin. *Berliner Childhood around 1900*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006.

him, shock became the only means by which real experience in the poetic sense, *Erfahrung*, could be tapped within metropolitan culture. In Benjamin's adoption of Freud,⁴⁷ he describes shock as the effect of the penetration of stimuli beyond the protection of the outer region of the psyche, the “cortex,” a region of the brain which generates anxieties in order to absorb the excesses of stimulation originating from a chaotic environment—anxious fantasies, in this sense, according to Freud, could also be generated after a shocking event in order to retroactively undergird the psyche against traumatic penetration. This technical understanding of the phenomenon of anxiety reveals that, on the one hand, it is a protective defense against experiences which destabilize individual identity, and yet, on the other, may also culminate in nervous disorders that inhibit the successful integration of the individual into the metropolitan social order. *Anxiety at this level is both symptom of psychic degeneration while simultaneously a form of protection against it.*

Anxiety finds expression within fantasies that simulate shocking events and replay the moment of rupture within the psyches of those afflicted, whether these events have already occurred or not. Although, it seems they may be recognized as traumatic if they occur after an accident or other calamity, whereas if they occur beforehand, they function almost as a prophylactic against the traumatic impact of the real thing. Thus, anxious risk-fantasies, while preparing the psyche for possible occasions of violent intrusion, may also afflict individuals with a constant sense of panic and foreboding that interferes with their functioning in metropolitan society. The ultimate fear associated with this inability to function socially was of becoming an “outcast,” as someone no longer capable of participating in society as a normal human actor, as

⁴⁷ See *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, Sigmund. *The Major Works of Sigmund Freud*. Chicago and London: Encyclopaedia Britannica, inc., 1988.)

well as in the production process, and in the most extreme cases as a “dehumanized subject.”

This fear of becoming an outcast was also, of course, part of the complex that generated the very same anxieties which could eventually transform the individual into one.

In “Some Motifs on Baudelaire,” Benjamin paints a portrait of the urban crowd, informed in part by Poe’s *The Man of the Crowd*,⁴⁸ a short story which focuses on the movements of a crowded London street, portraying it as a jagged and irregular composite of fits and starts, and quick cuts—the diametric opposite of the leisurely stroll along the bourgeois promenade. This stream of quick unexpected movements, evokes experiences of combat, in which one must be constantly vigilant against surges of unexpected force from one’s surroundings. In a basic sense, the movement of the urban masses as a collection of forces has the power to summon impulses and reactions within the nervous complex of human locomotion, and yet, within micro-seconds, to obviate these same impulses by changing the context in such a way that they are no longer appropriate. This entails that simple navigation requires adaptability to rapidly changing conditions and a reconciliation with the fact that so many of the energies activated by the external world will be interrupted before they are fully experienced.

Benjamin makes a powerful connection between this mode of human locomotion and industrial labor on the factory floor by referencing Marx: “In working with machines, workers learn to co-ordinate ‘their own movements with the uniformly constant movements of an automaton.’ These words shed a peculiar light on the absurd kind of uniformity with which Poe wants to saddle the crowd—uniformities of attire and behavior, but also a uniformity of facial expression. Those smiles provide food for thought.”⁴⁹ (Or later on, “The shock experience which

⁴⁸ Edgar Allen Poe. “Man of the Crowd.” <http://pinkmonkey.com/dl/library1/crowd.pdf>, 1840.

⁴⁹ Walter Benjamin. *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 1989. p.175

the passer-by has in the crowd corresponds to what the worker experiences at his machine.” (176)) This association with capitalist industry paves the way for a certain kind of thinking which can grasp the deep homologies between mechanization and the energies of an untamed and unmanaged nature within the metropolis. “Poe’s text makes us understand the true connection between wildness and discipline. His pedestrians act as if they had adapted themselves to the machines and could express themselves only automatically. Their behavior is a reaction to shocks. ‘If jostled, they bowed profusely to the jostlers.’” (176) In this sense, it appears that urban inhabitants have an aspect to their character which anticipates shocks and disruptions before they occur, and when they do, they will just “keep smiling” in order to function as “mimetic shock absorber[s].”

At this point, one cannot fail to mention the contributions of the father of metropolitan sociology, Georg Simmel, whose “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” written in Berlin in 1903, examines the intersection of the form of the metropolis, exchange value and the emergence of the blasé attitude. Simmel’s urban sociology also focused on the transformation of the “sensory foundations of mental life” due to an increased exposure of consciousness to more environmental stimuli, a process which he claimed brought on a more “intellectualistic” reaction to urban phenomena that paralleled the predominance of the money economy. In the same manner that the useful qualities of objects became secondary to their capacity to be exchanged, the intellectualistic attitude of the city-dweller would ensure that most experiences also had this kind of interchangeable character unless they somehow managed to penetrate beyond the first layers of reception. “Because of the character of calculability which money has there has come into the relationships of the elements of life a precision and a degree of certainty in the definition of the

equalities and inequalities and an unambiguousness in agreements and arrangements, just as externally this precision has been brought about through the general diffusion of pocket watches.”⁵⁰ However, the exactness of urban coordination, which is also at work within the minds of its inhabitants, also has the repercussion of inculcating what Simmel calls a blase attitude in city-dwellers, who seem to be incapable of perceiving urban phenomena with the freshness that they may deserve. “Just as an immoderately sensuous life makes one blase because it stimulates the nerves to their utmost reactivity until they finally can no longer produce any reaction at all, so, less harmful stimuli, through the rapidity and the contradictoriness of their shifts, force the nerves to make such violent responses, tear them about so brutally that they exhaust their last reserves of strength and, remaining in the same milieu, do not have time for new reserves to form.” (14) Thus, this attitude is formed out of the scarcity of attentive energies to process the multiplicity of even banal factors in the environment. This attitude will, of course, have a significant impact on historical perception.

Further on in Benjamin’s essay, he discusses how the conscious region of the psyche is also characterized by a mode of remembering, *Erinnerung*, which itemizes experience into a temporal schematic as “something which has been lived,” *Erlebnis*. Thus, for Benjamin, consciousness generally tends to protect the deeper regions of the psyche while also sapping experience of its poetic quality. The use of these terms suggests for him a shift in the meaning of the larger category of *tradition*. Tradition, signified often by the holiday for Benjamin, becomes a memory anchor by which the “*memoire volontée*” may recall experience, but yet it is also the substance of a collective involuntary memory, which holds a reservoir of poetic material. The

⁵⁰ Georg Simmel. *Metropolis and Mental Life*. The Blackwell City Reader. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson, eds.. Oxford and Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002.

importance of tradition for Benjamin is its role as the nexus of individual and collective history. In his words: “Where there is experience [Erfahrung] in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine with material of the collective past. The rituals with their ceremonies, their festivals...kept producing the amalgamation of these two elements of memory over and over again. They triggered recollection [Gedächtnis] at certain times and remained handles of memory [Erinnerung] for a lifetime. In this way, voluntary and involuntary memory lose their exclusiveness.”⁵¹ For Benjamin, experience in the strict sense becomes poetic experience when the distinctions between individual and collective history, and between voluntary and involuntary memory, begin to break down. However, it remains unclear what is capable of producing such experience, especially in the age of late capitalism in which so much of everyday life is structured in such a way as to not “enter into experience.”

The greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions, the more constantly consciousness has to be alert as a screen against stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less do these impressions enter experience (*Erfahrung*), tending to remain in the sphere of a certain hour of one’s life (*Erlebnis*). Perhaps the special achievement of the shock defense may be seen in its function of assigning to an incident a precise point in time in consciousness at the cost of the integrity of its contents. (163)

This last sentence is quite telling for Benjamin’s elaboration of the concept of recollection in which a particular impression, or trace, will imprint itself onto the psyche without tampering with the impression’s integrity. However, the apparent cost of this pure memory is the inability to fix it within a regulated temporal continuum; thus, unadulterated memory, whose palpable vitality remains intact and whose flavor perhaps increases under the pressures of preservation like wine, may not be recalled according to its temporal fixity because it has none.

⁵¹ Walter Benjamin. *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 1989. p.160

Benjamin alludes to the possibility of a domain of collective involuntary memory, some reservoir of historical input, whose contents remain unorganized and dislodged from fixity in any temporal scheme. But if such a sacred sphere of the historical unconscious were to exist in its unadulterated state, where and how would it be found? If there is a home for lost histories, or the possibility of their afterlife, as Benjamin seems to suggest in a number of important essays, it seems that it would only be possible to experience them as spectral entities or “ghosts,” which rise up out of a constellation of situational factors. However, I think it is important to emphasize that while Benjamin’s messianism injects a clear tinge of mysticism into his philosophy of history, these constellations do erupt out of material conditions, and while the perceiver, and his or her constitution, is part of the constellation, the perceiver is also part of the new, unique, material circumstances that came together at that particular instant. The eruption of an unredeemed history, or one whose suffering or tragedy was never appropriately acknowledged by the historical record, occurs in a manner, it would seem, that parallels Malte’s quasi-hallucinations. Malte sees the unredeemed and unnoticed dimensions of real metropolitan history, however much his actual visions must surely be considered the hallucinatory products of his own mind.

In another essay *Theses on the Philosophy of History*,⁵² Benjamin describes what it means to receive impressions of history on the verge of their permanent disappearance. “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was” (Ranke). It means to cease hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a

⁵² Ibid

moment of danger. The danger effects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes.” (255) In opposition to an historicist approach to the past, Benjamin’s historical materialism renounces any claim to the truth of the past “as it really was,” which is also to say, that even if an account of historical causality could be proven accurate beyond a doubt, this would in no way supply it with historical truth. Rather, true history exists as a “memory as it flashes up.” While it remains unsaid from where exactly a memory originates, it is clear that by the use of the term “memory” that what avails itself to the historical materialist’s perception does not need to be accurate, and as a memory, could certainly be subject to distortion and alteration. But for Benjamin, true history is based in the contact between a superstructural concatenation or “apparition” arising somehow from historical content and material factors in the present moment—altogether, a historical constellation. This apparition, while not necessarily available to an untrained eye, may nonetheless be perceived in accordance with the subjective composition of the perceiver. Even though it is possible to see how true history, in Benjamin’s eyes, necessarily entails its perception and interpretation (and hence distortion) by a “particular” human subject, it is a bit unclear how this moment of the past emerges, where it is stored, and through which medium it is conveyed.

In this sense, it seems that shock and the poetic dimension of the *memoire involuntée* have a very intimate connection which Benjamin will continue to explore through analysis of Baudelaire’s poetry. However, before getting into this, Benjamin also goes into an analysis of the relationship between mass media and its connection to the realm of experience, paying particular attention to the most ubiquitous of metropolitan media, the daily newspaper.

Man’s inner concerns do not have their issueless private character by nature. They do so only when he is increasingly unable to assimilate the data of the world around him by way of

experience. Newspapers constitute one of many evidences of such an inability. If it were the intention of the press to have the reader assimilate the information it supplies as part of his own experience, it would not achieve its purpose. But its intention is just the opposite, and it is achieved: to isolate what happens from the realm in which it could affect the experience of the reader. The principles of journalistic information (freshness of the news, brevity, comprehensibility, and, above all, lack of connection between the individual news items) contribute as much to this as does the make-up of the pages and the paper's style. (158-159)

It appears here, according to Benjamin, that the object of the newspaper is not to enrich experience, but rather to "isolate" events from entering its domain. The German word "isolieren" is interestingly used here and its double meaning of "to isolate" and "to insulate" is for our purposes important. The newspaper functions as a kind of "insulation" which separates interior from exterior, preventing events in collective history from actually entering into individual experience. In the same way that newspaper as a material substance may be used to insulate entities from the cold, its formal presentation of content serves to insulate the psyche from penetrating stimuli.

In this instance, we have the juxtaposition of two different forms of urban literary production, which, rather than situating them along the spectrum of fiction vs. non-fiction, it seems more sensible to see them through the lenses of *shock* and *insulation*. Benjamin's interpretations of Baudelaire, who in many ways should be considered the father of metropolitan poetics and the inspiration behind the first half of *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*,⁵³ emphasize how the poetic process entailed encounters with a shocking vitality that jugged the reader out of his position within the mass choreography of urban existence. "Without reflection there would be nothing but the sudden start, usually the sensation of fright which, according to

⁵³ Rainer Maria Rilke. *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

Freud, confirms the failure of the shock defense. Baudelaire has portrayed this condition in a harsh image. He speaks of a duel in which the artist, just before being beaten, screams in fright. This duel is the creative process itself. Thus Baudelaire placed the shock experience at the very center of his artistic work.” (163) It seems possible to examine metropolitan poetics as a genre in which shock plays a central role, and in this sense, it is also possible to conceive of shock as the moment of entry into a “mythic” dimension undergirding rationalized society.

However, on the other hand, we have the phenomenon of literary “insulation,” which rather than penetrating the deeper layers of experience will insulate these areas from exposure to the shock of events. This insulating sphere seems to be similar to what Malte expects from his furnishings and other possessions, but does not receive. However, here, this form of insulation is not individualized in the form of possessions; rather, it works on the entire population, providing a layer between individual experience and a domain of collective experience. This kind of narrative work serves to rationalize and formalize collective happenings in such a way as to function under a law of equivalence, making each element a part of some collective *Erlebnis*, but nonetheless, a part which could be formally exchanged for another. This prosaic world acts as the narrative counterpart to statistical rationalization, granting stories and legibility to urban phenomena that have undergone different forms of biopolitical processing. However, the kinds of narrative formations which give form to biopolitical calculation are of a different order than the literary forays into a mythic dimension which sustains and undergirds sanitized modernity, and this distinction must be correctly understood.

Paris, as Benjamin insists, must be thought of as the capital of the 19th century, in which Hausmannization as spatial technology brought about the formation of the new category of the

urban masses. As Benjamin writes about Baudelaire: “In his dedication of his collection to the editor-in-chief of *La Presse*, Arsene Houssaye, Baudelaire wrote: ‘Who among us has not dreamt, in his ambitious days, of the miracle of a poetic prose? It would have to be musical without rhythm and rhyme, supple and resistant enough to adapt itself to the lyrical stirrings of the soul, the wave motions of dreaming, the shocks of consciousness. This ideal, which can turn into an *idée fixe* will grip especially those who are at home in the giant cities and the web of their numberless interconnecting relationships.’” (165) This attempt for Baudelaire underscores the necessity of the prosaic for the historical period he addresses, that it cannot continue to be regarded as the refuse pile of failed attempts at artistic conveyance (a call to action taken up by an ardent young Rilke.) Rather, it is within the medium of the prosaic that the shocking secrets of the poetic must find their literary home. The strength of poetic power no longer inheres within a distance from this field of literary reflection; rather, the poetic moment occurs precisely when a shocking truth bursts forth out of its context of insulation. Stated differently, poesis in the day of sanitized modernity occurs when the very substance used to insulate consciousness from the traumatic content of its historical situation suddenly erases this impression of distance, opening up consciousness to a reception of larger forces that as of yet have no other experiential correlate other than that of the mythic. However, as with Malte, the experience of metropolitan poetics which bursts out through the infrastructure that contains and channels collective life in the city is dangerous and can certainly be perceived as a threat, just as in primitive society one failed ritual act may allow an individual to come into contact with a dangerous divinity.

It is also important to note that this poetic project does not itself take a side in the politics of sanitized modernity. This earth-moving impulse to unveil the mythic rivers which flow

uninterruptedly and invisibly beneath the surface of the city is one shared by those who would love to see all forms of tyranny be vanquished from the world, and those alike whose visions of the future are saturated by an intoxicating wish to see all sectors of civilization move in concert under the almighty hand of a new dictator. It is this mythic territory of the imagination that is fought over by interests who share one thing in common: that the banal prosaic universe of the culture industry and consumer capitalism should be displaced by the vital cultural material that already undergirds it, and that its shameless approximation in the form of the commodity should be thrown into the fire. However, it is here that this dialectic of enlightenment once again becomes interesting: without vital substance of its own, the very machinations of the culture industry and sanitized modernity require these aesthetic and poetic innovations to produce new mythic monsters to be disenchanting and rationalized.



Biosocial Intimacy vs Biopower: The Myth of Rationalized Techno-Science in Berlin

Berlin, at the onset of the 20th century, became the home of new public works, whose imposing presence restructured the practical and symbolic landscape in what had become one of the biggest cities in the western world. These architectural marvels, from the Anhalter Bahnhof to James Hobrecht's mid-nineteenth century revolutionary sewage canalization system,⁵⁴ became the symbols of a new sanitized and insulated social order, erected with the aim of containing the excessive potentials released by industrial accumulation, a phenomenon that led to the rapid development of urban infrastructure, and transformed the city from a smaller-sized

⁵⁴ See Claus Bernet. "The 'Hobrecht Plan' (1862) and Berlin's Urban Structure." *Urban History*. 31. (2004). p.1

agglomeration into a *Grossstadt* in quite a short period of time. This transformation was both infrastructural and aesthetic, and Berlin's late jump into heavy industrial production and the empire game of the late 19th century, also provided the opportunity to address some of the pitfalls of industrialism before they reached a critical state, as was already the case in other European cities at the time.⁵⁵ As the capital of the new German Reich entered the 20th century, it already had a fully-modernized transportation system (equipped even with farms on the outskirts of the city in an innovative attempt to reuse waste), a multi-leveled social insurance bureaucracy (with a small army of adjunct physicians entering into the fledgling medical professions) which responded to disruptions in the rhythm of industrial wealth-accumulation, as well as a comprehensive housing plan which provided for an influx of young laborers.

Berlin's abrupt appearance as modernized metropolis on the global stage must also be juxtaposed against its 19th century existence, along with the rest of Germany. In contrast, the other stars in the industrial firmament of the European "Metropole," particularly London and Paris had, as urbanities, already by mid-century begun to exhibit the mass phenomena and problems of population concentration that came to be understood under the heading of the "social question."⁵⁶ Thus, in addition to a colonial experience with otherness (however brutal this may have been), other European capitals and their inhabitants had already been introduced personally to the contradictions within capitalist accumulation, as well as to the increased presence of foreigners in the larger cities, stemming most often from the colonies. In Germany, however, the emergence of the metropolis, with all of its darker shades, was an unprecedented

⁵⁵ See Richard Evans. *The Coming of the Third Reich*. New York: Penguin Books, 2003.

⁵⁶ See Richard Evans. *Death in Hamburg: Society and Politics in the Cholera Years 1830-1910*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987.

phenomenon, especially considering that it was not really formed out of slower accumulation of goods and labor, but was developed quickly to fulfill an infrastructural demand by a liberalist political-economic policy.⁵⁷ All of this also occurred during a time when other European colonial capitals were beginning to address the social consequences of their own major industrial booms. Germany's late start in these ventures also granted it the opportunity to adopt the most up-to-date approaches to urban design and hygiene, issues that in Paris, for example, could only be retroactively mitigated.

While Paris, as a metropolitan imaginary, may be characterized as the place in which the most fantasies took literary form to express an aesthetic sublime of the "natural-urban" around the turn of the century, Berlin is the really the prototypical city in Europe in which this aesthetics became the most dangerously politicized in the years leading up to World War II. As we saw in Malte's narrative, the experience of the modern metropolis grants access to the perception of a domain of shared, collective life, linked together on a socio-microbiological level, and this domain is often portrayed contradictorily as both one which may threateningly absorb individual life, yet also yield the most potent aesthetic and philosophical impressions of the historical period, and perhaps also of preceding periods. This aesthetic experience of the city, registered initially in Paris, takes on a larger significance in Berlin as a cultural counterpart to the cultivation of social institutions and bureaucracies which are, in part, established to manage the social-materiality of collective life. An important question is how the emergence of bureaucracies of public health and social welfare in Germany's capital work to "rationalize" this social substance, that in literary representations, was primarily portrayed through a vacillation between

⁵⁷ See Greg Eghigian. "The Politics of Victimization: Social Pensioners and the German Social State in the inflation of 1914-1924." Copyright of Central European History (Brill Academic Publishers), 2001.

descriptions of uncanny paranoia and sublime bliss. What does it mean that after fantasies of collective socio-microbiological life begin to appear as a new source of modernist aesthetic projects that this same social substance becomes the object of a sphere of biopolitical calculation and rationalization? However, in spite of the rise of these biopolitical institutions, the utopian dream and the dystopian fear around biosocial intimacy does not cease to permeate Berlin's various imaginaries, and literatures. It is in fact both dimensions, the biopolitical and the biosocial, which will become nourishing tributaries to Nazi ideologies in the twenties and thirties. The "sacred" call of biosocial intimacy is not expunged by biopolitical bureaucracy, but is rather carried within as its mythic kernel.

The built environment of metropolitan Berlin at the turn of the century can be characterized by an increasingly sanitized architecture whose major features had a monumental stature. Andreas Killen, in his *Berlin Electropolis*,⁵⁸ writes how major electrical firms such as Siemens and AEG housed themselves in imposing modern buildings meant to convey a future of technological and scientific management of urban life, alongside the massive architectural projects designed for consumption, such as the Wertheim department store, which he calls "a temple of modern construction that enticed customers by displaying its wares in a setting reportedly illuminated by ten thousand light-bulbs." (12) While the majority of these works primarily served functional ends, their nonetheless "psychic" importance arose from their role as media for the transmission of an overarching fantasy that conveyed the idea of a culture that had finally superseded its immediate relationship to the natural world and the ecological relations that comprise it. These artifacts of urbanization conveyed a dream of sanitized modernity, whose

⁵⁸ Andreas Killen. *Berlin Electropolis: Shock, Nerves and German Modernity*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2006.

future completion would remove the nation from pre-modern afflictions that stem from a dependence upon nature. In this context, the natural world became a managed object under the manipulation of widespread urban technologies.

However, many of these new structures offering the promise of sanitized modernity were themselves reactions to other effects of rapid industrialization. Killen writes, “With the emergence of an industrial working class in Berlin had come the first appearance of the cluster of problems such as housing shortages and unhygienic living conditions, which collectively made up what contemporaries called the “social question”...A concerted building program, resulting in the construction of municipal hospitals, sanitation systems, housing and other infrastructure, put Berlin in the vanguard in the field of urban hygiene.” (21) This modernizing process also entails a refinement of the degree to which natural elements, resources and bi-products were managed by technological and bureaucratic forces. Because this manipulation of natural forces began to shape the way that nature could appear within the urban environment, this also entailed an increase in the epistemological and perceptual failure on the part of inhabitants to comprehend eruptions of “unmanaged nature” within the manicured space of the metropolis. Following the arguments of Wolfgang Schivelbusch in his *The Railway Journey*,⁵⁹ the rise in technologically related accidents in the city tended to emphasize the specter of human biological frailty in the midst of overarching technological power, and thus, the often brutal appearance of human casualty in this landscape caused a new kind of *shock* within the population. However, the most common kind of eruption of “biological nature” still took the form of contagious disease or illnesses thought to have a contagious character (manifesting as both physical and psychological

⁵⁹ Wolfgang Schivelbusch. *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

disorders), both of which were characterized by the abrupt reassertion of corporeality and embodiment in an otherwise seamless picture of orchestrated human movement and technological machinery.

Killen also traces the evolution of nervous disorders and their comprehension by the psychiatric and medical disciplines. According to his history, the types of disorders classified under the umbrella term of neurasthenia, became increasingly associated with a broader spectrum of social classes from the end of the 19th century and into the 20th, delinking these illnesses with their heritage as disorders of the bourgeoisie. This extension of the recognition of nervous disorders had the effect of engendering new safeguards in the development of institutions of public health and insurance in Germany, safeguards which acknowledged and counteracted inevitable risks within a modern, and modernizing, society. However, the generalization of these diseases also produced a sense of contingency around their contraction, now that they were no longer only attributed, or likely to occur, to certain members of society. In a biopolitical sense, this suggested the necessary risk of nervous disorders within modern society. However, the contingency of these disorders also generated social anxiety because the disease's etiology could only be explained by the presence of environmental stresses, which most, if not all, urban inhabitants were subject to, and by endogenous disposition. The major fear, beyond death and sheer physical degradation, associated with these kinds of illnesses found its limit-case in the figure of the "dehumanized subject," one whose degeneration ejected him from the production process and rendered him unfit to participate within the social community. This figure, a fundamental product of the social effects of the industrial over-accumulation and the capitalist class system, signified for many in the bourgeoisie the presence of national decline and

the attenuation of German cultural health. In this sense, individuals came to be measured by their ability to remain immune from these debilitating afflictions, but more often, this so-called immunity was justified by the logic of Darwinian genetic fitness which attributed these abilities to racial characteristics, especially in the late 1920's.

As we switch focus away from Paris and depictions of its abjection that form the substance of Malte's anguish, we find in Berlin a different problematic which stems from similar issues of anxiety and sanitization. In Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*,⁶⁰ the story begins with the main character's, Franz Biberkopf's, departure from a four-year stint at Tegel Prison, an exit, that instead of bringing him joy, shoved him into the throes of an uncontrollable anxiety. His observations, upon reentering the capital city, consist of an attention to infrastructural changes in the environment characterized by cleanliness and sanitization. "Hundreds of polished window-panes, let 'em blaze away, are they going to make you afraid or something, why, you can smash 'em up, can't you, what's the matter with 'em, they're polished clean, that's all." (5) Reentering late Weimar Berlin was for Biberkopf a confrontation with larger social and civic processes which were redesigning the character of the city, "modernizing" it if you will. He continues: "The pavement on Rosenthaler Platz was being torn up; he walked on the wooden planks along with others...Outside everything was moving, but—back of it—there was nothing! It—did not—live! It had happy faces, it laughed, waited in twos and threes on the traffic islands opposite Aschinger's, smoked cigarettes, turned the pages of newspapers. Thus it stood there like the street lamps—and—became more and more rigid. They belonged with the houses, everything white, everything wooden." (5-6) This passage's contradictory dimension captures a complicated

⁶⁰ Alfred Döblin. *Berlin Alexanderplatz: The Story of Franz Biberkopf*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1997.

two-fold process of modernization. On the one hand, all aspects of the environment are engaged in a new urban choreography that is constantly undergoing social and technological refinement. However, on the other hand, they all seem to be missing a particular vitality which Biberkopf yearns for. People and their actions and gestures appear to be indistinguishable from the infrastructure which serves as their backdrop with “everything white, everything wooden.” The whiteness of the landscape of course suggests its pure, unblemished veneer, but also the absence of traces and leftovers of past activity. The very varnished exteriors of all “wooden” objects in the metropolis, including individuals, appear to convey no history. But for him, this absent history is something he understands as “vitality,” but what sort of vitality is it?

After an interlude where Franz is invited from the hallway of a apartment building by a Jewish man into his home, Franz decides that with his newfound freedom, he should find a prostitute. This desire hints at a dimension of what he means by vitality. However, Franz encounters his own sexual disfunction, upon which the narrator goes into a neuro-medical explanation of the male sex drive: “The erotic impression releases the erotic tension of the cerebral cortex, the current flows as an erotic stimulus from the cerebral cortex to the switch center of the interbrain. The stimulus then rolls down the spine. Not unimpeded, however, for, before leaving the brain, it has to pass the brakes of the inhibitions, those predominantly psychic inhibitions which play a large role in the form of moral scruples, lack of self-confidence, fear of humiliation, fear of infection and impregnation and things of this order.” (33) This medically dry explanation of the male sex drive appears suddenly within the narration, and from a narrative perspective, hints at a different matrix of control and authority in which Biberkopf finds himself. In general, Biberkopf’s behavior throughout the story is not directly restricted, especially in

contrast to the disciplinary regime he lived under within prison. Rather than being disciplined, an authority he seems to mourn the loss of, his actions and thoughts are analyzed and dissected according to general categories of knowledge. The narrator here speaks not of Franz's particular sex drive, but to the medically-explained, statistically-substantiated male sex drive in general. This passage is also interesting because of its descriptions of so-called psychic inhibitions and where they originate from. While located in a particular region of the body, and also thought to be endogenous, these inhibitions are also declared to be condensations of external obstacles which take the internal form of a potentially debilitating anxiety. It is precisely in this domain in which the causes of a particular deficiency cannot be fully determined as endogenous or exogenous, an undecidability often associated with other kinds of nervous disorders.

The interjection of this passage alludes to some of the larger, more biopolitical, forces of social control in the metropolis. Franz is less often subject, in the sense of discipline,⁶¹ to different authorities, but he is subject to an omnipresent interpretation that follows him throughout his everyday life. The rise of metropolitan technologies of social control emphasize the management of life processes on a large scale and the "calculation of probabilities" rather than the discipline of behaviors and tendencies. As Biberkopf wrestles with larger social forces that may seem to resemble fate, his own personal story becomes counted among the ranks of many others who fall into his same social position. He is thus "counted," rather than controlled, and his existence illustrates the necessity of certain pitfalls built into the very infrastructure of social life, whether they appear as character flaws or lack of opportunity due to scarce unemployment and social class. In this sense, Biberkopf's story is the narrativization of a

⁶¹ See Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. London: Penguin Books, 1991.

statistical existence which is considered to be an inevitable “evil” or misfortune within the larger population. As Foucault states in his *Security, Territory, Population*, “The basic function of discipline is to prevent everything, even and above all the detail. The function of security is to rely on details that are not valued as good or evil in themselves, that are taken to be necessary, inevitable processes, as natural processes in the broad sense...”⁶² What is interesting about this novel, as a whole, is that it seems at many levels to adopt the attitude of an “apparatus of security” in its estimation of the protagonist’s behavior, seeing his failures and lapses as a necessary dimension of the population, which must not be judged but rather, “allowed to occur.” Biberkopf personalizes this statistical minority which must fail socially or fall into delinquent behavior, *meaning that what may construed to be fate in the novel is actually a technology of power that expresses the immutability of certain social conditions for the collective health of the social body.*

It seems then that both within the urban context of the story, as well as within the structure of the narration itself, we find the presence of a “sanitized” social order that, on the one hand, attempts to rid the urban exterior of traces of abjection and uncleanness, while on the other, will subject deviant, “unsanitized” modes of being to psychological and medical analysis as a means of managing them. In this sense, the character of Biberkopf represents someone who is “at risk,” due to the fact that he desires proximity and involvement in unseemly behavior in order to more comfortably navigate through his surroundings. On the other hand, this “at risk” status also suggests that he is a risk to others, which various events in the novel will demonstrate, but also, himself, is the narrative representation of “generalized social risk.” Part of Döblin’s

⁶² Michel Foucault. *Security, Territory, Population*. New York: Picador, 2007. p. 45

innovation as an author, who was also himself a psychiatrist, beyond his formal, modernist techniques, is his portrayal of the inner psychology of a new social order, even though it may be impossible to verify how much his portrayals resemble the inner lives of outcast individuals. But this narrative omniscience does not simply grant itself unmediated access to Franz's inner life, it necessarily confronts and integrates other external vantage points that make up what could be called a social super-ego.

While Döblin's project attempts to string together the factual components that have become unhinged from their larger statistical expressions, he made it a point to avoid the kind of naturalistic realism prominent in the late 19th century. According to David B. Dollenmayer,

“First, he has avoided writing about his contemporary environment because he does not want to be misunderstood as perpetuating the tradition of nineteenth-century naturalism by ‘imitating Zola.’ If he eventually came to call his own fictional method—and indeed his worldview—*Naturalismus*, he meant something quite different from Zola's *naturalisme*. Döblin, himself a doctor who practiced first psychiatry and then internal medicine, was much more skeptical than Zola had been in the previous, more positivistic generation that science and the scientific method would eventually be able to answer completely all questions about human life and the universe.”⁶³

While his narrative approach refrained from a direct approach toward mystification or “re-enchantment,” Döblin's realism was not marked by positivism or a mechanistic patterning of specific archetypes in the tradition of Zola. While the character of Franz Biberkopf provides the human coordinates for generalized social risk, his motivations and actions are also perpetually resistant to the kinds of interpretations which are normally associated with this statistical type, which is not to say that these interpretive schematics fail in the face of a real person. Rather,

⁶³ David B. Dollenmayer. *The Berlin Novels of Alfred Döblin: Wadzek's Battle with the Steam Turbine, Berlin Alexanderplatz, Men without Mercy, and November 1918*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988. p.3

Franz's personification of statistically-defined facticity also appears to require a mythic component, a mythic realism, to accurately represent its interiority.

The structure of the novel also borrows some formal features from greek tragedy in order to give a dramatic arc to Franz's story, even though part of the epiphany of the story consists in the shedding of a belief in fate in favor of an acceptance of factuality. As Kathleen Komar states, "The opening statement by the narrator is read as an argumentum preceding the tragic action. A chorus of voices reflects on the meaning of Biberkopf's destiny and the implications of his actions. And, finally, a shift from romantic belief in fate to a modern awareness of reality provides a catharsis precipitated by a modern pursuit by the Erinyes."⁶⁴ However, while the novel slowly strips away the basis for a mythic metaphysics of fate, there are plenty of instances of sheer contingency which encourage reflection and appreciation, even though they may not be considered to be any kind of portent or manifestation of transcendent powers. As Franz reads the newspaper in the Chauseestrasse, he encounters a speech by Chancellor Marx that is found to be simply interwoven within the narrative. "Fatalistic speech made by Chancellor Marx: Whatever is to happen lies, in my opinion, in the hands of a Divine Providence, which has its special intentions for each people. Human accomplishment, on the other hand, will remain only fragmentary. All we can do is to continue to give our utmost effort according to our convictions, and thus I shall have fulfilled, faithfully and honestly, the office I now hold."⁶⁵ This passage is interesting for a few reasons. Initially, the levels of remediation and layering of the text: these statements begin as a speech, then are transformed into a newspaper blurb, and finally they

⁶⁴ Kathleen Komar. "Technique and Structure in Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*." *The German Quarterly*. 54. (1981). p. 318

⁶⁵ Alfred Döblin. *Berlin Alexanderplatz: The Story of Franz Biberkopf*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1997. p.74

become interwoven within the narrative of the novel itself. Secondly, the content that is conveyed is one of fate and each individual's limitation to what has been allotted to him by providence. If we take these two dimensions together, we see that the narration and interpretation of Franz's life emphasizes this mythic fatefulness at every turn, but the way that this knowledge is transmitted to him comes through the form of the newspaper, the very medium which Benjamin claimed could not aptly convey mythic and poetic content. In this case, it also does not convey something poetic in itself, but its remediation within the narrative suggests to the contrary. This may be an example of what Baudelaire meant by poetic prose, in that the very media used to insulate individuals from a more intensive experience of their circumstances becomes the conduit through which a larger poetic truth may be conveyed. Although Franz may himself not register this poetic side of his circumstances, it is possible for the reader to see how many of these instances, in which the urban environment and its symbolic infrastructure (such as street signs) become part of the narrative, convey something to the effect that individual lives are in the hands of larger, inscrutable processes.

Peter Fritzsche, in his *Reading Berlin 1900*,⁶⁶ addresses how the newspaper prefigured Döblin's modernist project. "In many ways the newspaper provided Döblin with a miniaturized version of his entire project. Its unity is purely formal; there is no narrative line to order the disconnected elements. As Fisher points out, "column by column, weighted without account of importance, the heroic and trivial repose side by side. '...Berlin newspapers profiled precisely those events that were fleeting and provisional and with each edition produced a brand new version of the metropolis, thereby adding to the 'spectacle of incessant actuality.'" (40) This

⁶⁶ Peter Fritzsche. *Reading Berlin 1900*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1996.

notion of a “spectacle of incessant actuality” is important because it suggests a temporal order in which metropolitan inhabitants process urban reality in a normative fashion. This spectacle may be considered a sustaining form of continuity for the modern metropolis. To illustrate this, I will turn quickly to an aphorism from Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*⁶⁷ concerning what he calls “pseudo-cyclical time.” “While the consumption of cyclical time in ancient societies was consistent with the real labor of those societies, the pseudo-cyclical consumption of developed economies contradicts the abstract irreversible time implicit in their system of production. Cyclical time was the really lived time of unchanging illusions. Spectacular time is the illusorily lived time of a constantly changing reality.” (86) His reference to the cyclical time of the ancients can be thought of as a kind of “mythic time,” as a “really lived time of unchanging illusions.” Pseudo-cyclical time is rather the commodified version of a mythic time that should sustain a consciousness that is no longer attuned to the temporal logic of its historical situation. This entails that temporal perception for modern urban consciousness requires the form of the pseudo-myth in order to be experienced. The pseudo-myth takes vignettes of present existence and establishes a continuity between them and historical antecedents.

In this context, it is important to note Adorno and Horkheimer’s claim concerning the resurgence, or rather, embeddedness, of myth within the techno-scientific apparatus.⁶⁸ Strangely, it is precisely the moments in which Biberkopf’s life is characterized as damned, or incorrigibly stuck within a pattern that appears to be like fate, that one is granted access to a literary figuration of less visible techno-scientific processes which are engaged in the management of

⁶⁷ Guy Debord. *Society of the Spectacle*. New York: Zone Books, 1994.

⁶⁸ Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1997.

social life. The more naked appearance of these biopolitical processes will assume a mythic form, not just as a mode of appearance, but to follow Adorno and Horkheimer's dialectic further, as a "mythic truth" at the core of generalized rationalization. In this sense, the greater that sanitization and rationalization cover social life and social space with their logics and schemas, the greater that this mythic dimension will attain a consistency and magnetism in a general sense.

For Döblin, it seems that his project demands the structuring of metropolitan experience into a string of pseudo-myths which may or may not be related to one another, but somehow co-occupy the same temporal construct. But this structuring is not the result of an almighty hand of fate shaping the destinies of individuals; rather, we are left with the sheer contingency of facts, social and material, which form the basic units of society. "A wife, a child, it looks as if that were the whole world. I have no regrets. I don't feel any guilt about it. We have to take facts, like ourselves, the way they come. We shouldn't brag about our fate. I'm an enemy of Destiny, I'm not a Greek, I'm a Berliner."⁶⁹ Here, Biberkopf treats himself as a "fact" who cannot alter his given situation, but his description of himself as an enemy of destiny seems to indicate not that he hates his own fate or fate itself, but rather that the very idea of fate is a diversion from confronting the truth of one's situation. This is interesting because it indicates that the Berliner perspective, against that of the Greek, is to take the facts of metropolitan life as they are, without chimerical distortions. But these so-called "facts" also seem to have an internal life, along with a perspective which reflects on the conditions in which they find themselves, conditions that are shaped on the anvil of rationalized society. Once purged of a mythic backdrop, the horrific power

⁶⁹ Alfred Döblin. *Berlin Alexanderplatz: The Story of Franz Biberkopf*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1997. p.60

behind the rationalized orchestration of modern existence does not disappear; rather, a mythic transcendence must be represented through the facts of realism itself.

The very facticity which Franz refers to in this existential commentary is also a function of biopolitical calculation on human population. It seems that social facts, if seen from another standpoint, may also be appreciated as approximations of a “mythic situation” in which individuals find themselves, but are incapable of seeing because this standpoint is already considered to be irrational. “Is he hounded by things in his past, Ida and so on, by conscientious scruples, nightmares, restless sleep, tortures, Furies from the day of our great-grandmothers? Nothing doing. Just consider the change in his situation. A criminal, an erstwhile god-accursed man (where did you get that, my child?), Orestes, killed at the altar Clytemnestra, hardly pronounceable that name, eh? anyhow, she was his own mother.” (121) This passage suggests the attempt to find an historical equivalent or form for understanding Franz’s particular situation. While the narrator may associate the events of Franz’s life with the mythical story of Orestes, it is also clearly stated that Franz’s life situation lacks the grandeur of this mythic backdrop. The mythic backdrop which gives social significance to Franz’s life is one of facticity itself, a facticity which can be understood when quantified amidst other social data.



Biosocial Intimacy and Abstract Space in Fritz Lang's M

“Impossible to lay hands on a map of Berlin. In the hand of one of them I continually notice a book that looks like a map. But it always proves to be something entirely different, a list of the Berlin schools, tax statistics or something of the sort. I don't want to believe it, but, smiling, they prove it to me beyond any doubt.” — Franz Kafka⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Franz Kafka. *Kafka's Diaries 1914*. Web. <<http://www.scribd.com/doc/2223565/eBooktxt-Franz-Kafka-Diaries-1914>>

Fritz Lang's *M*⁷¹ provides a compelling sketch of biosocial intimacy because of the way in which all the various strata of civil society in Weimar Berlin are shown to be interwoven and interdependent after the horrible incident of a child's murder. Initially, the fact that the murderer's handwritten letter was published in the newspaper suggests both an irresponsibly sensationalist tabloid press, as well as a willingness on the part of social institutions to include this murderer within the representational network of the larger community. The very medium used to link members of a vast metropolis together, while usually providing a domesticated form within which normal and sensational events may appear, is here invaded by a deeply anti-social presence: the ambitions of a pathological child-murderer who is also, however, fundamentally a product of this society. In this regard, the sensationalist tabloid must be seen as a major contributor to the widespread panic which ensued from the murder of Elsie Beckmann, instilling a crippling fear into the population that slowed the economy and overextended police resources. The tabloid is literally marked by the hand of the killer, whose crooked handwriting is stamped onto the front page, naked and menacing. This collusion between a disruptive, anti-social force and a system of metropolitan mediation is shown here to be quite caustic with far-reaching consequences for all sectors of society. This indicates that part of what caused such a massive disruption of everyday life in Berlin is the fact that the very media used to insulate the population from its collective experience is here used to send that same population into shock. This placement of the "shocking" squarely into the confines of the quotidian and the prosaic also parallels Benjamin's notion of a metropolitan poesis,⁷² however sinister its context is here.

⁷¹ *M: Eine Stadte Sucht einen Moerder*. Dir. Fritz Lang. Nero Film AG, 1931. Film.

⁷² Walter Benjamin. *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 1989.

Even though we are given a direct view into the pathological sadism of the killer, Peter Lorre's performance also portrays the murderer Beckert as a pitiable figure. Beckert's shrieks against the criminal bullying and intimidation at the end of the film may actually kindle an unlikely sympathy in the viewer for a man who is portrayed here as a tragic figure unable to dispel or control his violent urges. However, the killer in this film is hated by everyone in the city including *other criminals*, who in the end conspire to root him out and eliminate him. It turns out these child murders have not only disrupted the everyday lives of normal citizens; the everyday business of criminals has also slowed to a trickle due to the search and seizure practices of the Berlin police force during their investigation. The everyday occurrences of *Razzia* (or police raids on local establishments) have threatened the city's criminal organizations with destitution. So, in an act of desperation they conspire to "take the law into their own hands" to find the killer, devoting all their energy and time to this pursuit, and in the end, even go as far as to give him a "fair trial."

At this underground trial, which takes place in an abandoned factory that went bust after the crisis of the late 1920's, the killer is even supplied with a lawyer, who vigorously and eloquently defends his client. In a stunning speech which clearly formulates the kernel of the insanity defense, Beckert's lawyer explains his client's actions to be the result of compulsions that he cannot control, justifying a demand for the criminally insane to be administered by the correct authorities and institutions. "Der muss morden" ("He must kill") was the phrase used repeatedly by both the plaintiff and the defense during the trial, and emphasizes the involuntary dimension to Beckert's murderous urges. This acknowledgement that the killer himself was afflicted by a sickness—that he could even be considered a victim in a certain sense—was

corroborated by all present at the trial, but was still not considered ample enough grounds to allow the criminal to live. The main reason for this was not a moral one; rather the decree of capital punishment rested upon the fact that there could be no guarantee that the criminal would not eventually escape from his internment facility or be released as a result of some medical laxity, overcrowding and/or funding problems. *The “criminal prosecution” in this case wanted to kill the killer because they feared that the medical-prison apparatus, an arm of the welfare state, was too inefficient to prevent the killer from killing again.*

Perhaps one of the most ingenious plot devices within the film is the manner in which the criminal was initially discovered, which turned out to be faster and more efficient than police procedures. The criminal organization decided that an effective surveillance network needed to be established on the streets, an informal network clearly juxtaposed against the surveillance system of the high-security building that was easily infiltrated by the criminals. For public surveillance of the streets the criminals decided to use the “die Organization der Bettlern” (the beggar’s organization) because these individuals were already out on the streets, living in constant intimate proximity with everyday public activity. This deployment of the homeless is particularly provocative because beggars are normally considered to be the “useless” part of society that has been rendered permanently unfit for the production process—an ideology which, during this period of economic depression and joblessness, was quite strong in late Weimar Berlin. The homeless population was also, in many ways, invisible, to the average pedestrian, and thus provided an unlikely, yet sophisticated, source of street intel. The beggar’s organization is also the social stratum which represents another kind of interconnectivity between members of a large population because they are the ones who come into constant contact with the traces of

collective life, a fact vividly portrayed when a homeless man is shown meticulously arranging discarded portion of cigars and cigarettes, assumedly gathered throughout a day of begging and scavenging. The beggar in this case has higher awareness of his proximity to the biosocial dimensions of metropolitan life, and may therefore be more capable of attributing stories and information to the traces of this life, traces which may also be considered clues if viewed correctly. Eventually, the killer is discovered by a blind homeless man because he recognized the tune the killer was whistling on the day that Elsie Beckmann was murdered.



M: Eine Stadte Sucht einen Moerder. Dir. Fritz Lang. Nero Film AG, 1931. Film. retrieved from <<http://faculty.cua.edu/johnsong/crime/pages/M/m42-inventory-cigarettes.jpg>>

In this case, the beggars, as the supposed abject part of society, can somehow more swiftly locate the presence of irregularity and abnormality within the urban system. The police, though, are not portrayed as utterly inefficient, as they do eventually, by their own methods, locate the residence of the killer (although, it did take them longer to do so.) Early on the police chief explains how they are looking in every possible corner within an ever-widening radius to find clues. In this respect it appears that a mode of urban surveillance emerges that is shared

between both cop and criminal. As Edward Dimendberg writes in his article comparing Lang's *M* with Losey's Bunker Hill-based remake from 1952, "M intimates that a paradoxical consequence of increased spatial mastery and surveillance—the very ability to locate and "address" spatial users—might well be the concomitant loss of a city's experienceable identity by those who inhabit it. The anonymous metropolis, unfettered from the historical associations of particular sites of memory and public spatial practices, a realm that Henri Lefebvre calls "abstract space," informs Lang's film."⁷³ (9) This mappability of the urban environment is clearly shown when the police find an empty bag of candy near the murder site in the park, as well as when the criminal organization dispatches the homeless informants to their positions on a map. Dimendberg argues that Lang's film conveys a featureless abstract space of Weimar Berlin, which is sharply juxtaposed against, one, the place-bound, gritty atmosphere of Bunker Hill in Losey's remake, and two, against a dynamic and improvisational mapping of urban space in the expressionist vein. This perception of urban space as abstract and without identity, though, was a complaint not unheard of in Berlin, especially in the Wilhelmine era.

Many visitors, including the likes of Mark Twain, saw Berlin as a city without a real historical presence, a perception clearly due to the fact that Berlin in its metropolitan boom was very young. As Twain writes,

I feel lost in Berlin. It has no resemblance to the city I had supposed it was. There was once a Berlin which I would have known, from descriptions in books—the Berlin of the last century and the beginning of the present one: a dingy city in a marsh, with rough streets, muddy and lantern-lighted, dividing straight rows of ugly houses all alike, compacted into blocks as square and plain and uniform and monotonous and serious as so many dry-goods boxes. But that Berlin has

⁷³ Edward Dimendberg. *From Berlin to Bunker Hill: Urban Space, Late Modernity, and Film Noir in Fritz Lang's and Joseph Losey's M*. Ohio University School of Film, 1997.

disappeared. It seems to have disappeared totally, and left no sign. The bulk of the Berlin of today has about it no suggestion of a former period. The site it stands on has traditions and a history, but the city itself has no traditions and no history. It is a new city; the newest I have ever seen.⁷⁴

Twain indicates that his image of Berlin, one fashioned out of literary descriptions of the past, was radically divergent from the city he encountered during his actual voyage. Twain's description of Berlin portrays a city which has squashed its predecessor, by paving an expansive array of wide streets over its "muddy and lantern-lighted" past, a past that, although was ugly and monotonous, did at least possess an historical identity. The bewildering disorientation and placelessness of Imperial Berlin is recapitulated in Lang's late Weimar film by displaying studio versions of street scenes. As Dimendberg notes, "Traditionally celebrated for its "realism" and ostensibly concerned with protecting the Berlin citizenry from dangerous psychopathic behavior, *M* contains surprisingly few representations of inhabited public urban space. It depicts a mostly studio-fabricated Berlin notably lacking in monumentality and composed of streets with little more than display windows."⁷⁵ Here, a flat, featureless topography, which causes disorientation, becomes mappable and holistically conceivable only in the domain of abstraction.

However, the film does emphasize, alongside this impression of abstract space, the importance of the minute, particular traces of everyday life, which have their unique signature and thus become of the utmost importance in the investigation of a crime. This dimension of social reality is one which the homeless population is all-too aware of. In the film the criminal underbelly and the homeless population is shown to be vital to the composition and even security of the social body. The homeless person, often pegged as parasitic and unproductive, is in closest

⁷⁴ Mark Twain. "The Chicago of Europe." Mark Twain's Travel Letters from 1891-92. Chicago Daily Tribune, April 3, 1892.

⁷⁵ Edward Dimendberg. *From Berlin to Bunker Hill: Urban Space, Late Modernity, and Film Noir in Fritz Lang's and Joseph Losey's M*. Ohio University School of Film, 1997. p.10

proximity to the raw interconnectivity of individuals with each other and their environment in the big city, a kind of interconnectivity which defies rational calculation within abstract space. In Lang's film, the entire city of Berlin is portrayed as one organism that includes both official authorities and bureaucracies, as well as everyday illegality, and thus may be viewed as a narrative of biosocial intimacy within a regime of abstract space. This total urban organism is afflicted by something toxic that threatens its security and its everyday commerce. It is in this way that Peter Lorre's character of the criminally sadistic is figured as an infectious entity that threatens to undermine the smooth functioning of the collective organism. Although, Beckert's behavior is not copied by other individuals in the film, it is clearly shown that the entire society has become "sick" as a result of the destructive presence of one "pathogen," who in this case happens to be one person let out of the insane asylum prematurely, due to improper diagnosis, lack of funding or general neglect.

While this film has a progressive aspect by showing the interconnectivity and interdependency of different social strata, it also anticipates Nazism by showing how the criminals have both reproduced the institutions of the state for their own purposes and have successfully attempted to mimic police power in order to further their agenda. This blurring into indistinction of a class of criminals with demographic civil institutions characterizes the jury in Beckert's "trial," a jury who wants to see him killed even though his compulsions are due to madness. Oddly enough, this rage at the killer morphs into a cynical critique of the welfare state and its inability to deal with unproductive or destructive members of society—so-called "degenerates" from the standpoint of population policy. The people in the jury laugh at the defense lawyer's statement that his client should be interned at a medical facility for the insane

with constant surveillance. The general opinion on the part of the jury is that these medical facilities can offer no guarantee that the killer will not escape or be let out in a few years time to kill again. As a result they find it better to simply dispose of him for the overall benefit and health of society (a judgement arrived at more soberly from a crowd who not moments beforehand was frothing at the mouth for blood.) Here, the crowd sees capital punishment as rationally necessary to prevent future child murders. It is this justification which sanctions the killing or disposing of the “abnormal” and is also an interesting commentary on who gets to determine normality and abnormality (what was once the physician, has now become the crime boss—a dynamic that becomes literal in Lang’s *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*.)⁷⁶ The film narrates how a criminal element, which sometimes even disguises itself as the police (as the gang did to break into the high-security building), can assume this power to differentiate normal from abnormal and punish accordingly. What occurs here is also interesting standpoint on the emergence of Nazism due to the fact that the same people who are considered from rightest gaze to be the “degenerates” of society—the homeless, the criminal, etc—are mobilized by an arch-criminal to call out the “true” degenerate and have him executed.

⁷⁶ *Das Testament Dr Mabuses*. Dir. Fritz Lang. Nero-Film AG, 1933. Film.

Chapter 2: Insurance, Expressionism and the Mythic Realism of “Risk Fantasy” in Weimar Berlin

In order to explore the problematics of undecidable illness and urban risk-fantasies in Weimar Berlin, this chapter will address the horrific specter of railway and industrial accidents in Germany throughout the earlier part of the 20th century, and how this manifested itself within the cultural imaginary in the 20's and 30's. Accidents in the big city were characterized by an unprecedented force and appeared to be a violent resurgence of nature's sublime power within a man-made context. The trope of the accident figured prominently as a limit-case in which the very soundness of modern security was tested and dramatized, while it was also the site around which debates about urban anxiety, nervous sickness, shock, the industrial welfare state, and the social insurance system were concentrated. The psychological effects of such accidents on victims often proved difficult to diagnose, which led to suspicions of simulation or “malingering” on the part of victims attempting to claim damages from insurance institutions. The problem of simulation articulates important epistemic and paradigm questions for this early era of the 20th century (questions which have only become more pressing at the beginning of the 21st century) suggesting a generalized vulnerability in the population to increasing material risks, *as well as a vulnerability to the perception of risk in the collective imaginary*. While all civilized apparatuses in the city appeared to function at an ever-increasing level of technical superiority, this did not prevent the tacit acknowledgement, on the part of both official and popular culture, of an expansion of risks, rather than a decrease—risks which were also calculated with a particular value by the insurance industry.

This problem of risk-perception will be explored by investigating the role of insurance both as a regularization of disruptions within the modern world, and as a different form of economic calculus in which destructive instances—as opposed to productive ones—such as accidents, illnesses and other disasters, are equated with an economic value. In addition to this, I am interested in how *the imagination of disaster in modern systems of distribution and production, and their representations in literature and film, also corresponds to a monetary value*. Representations of the catastrophic illuminate a sphere of value which underlies the modern world, a sphere which only becomes apparent in instances of malfunction and disruption. These instances of destruction, both real and imaginary, compel individuals, families, companies and governments to invest in them, even though it is surely preferred that they never come to pass. Insurance entails the investment of monetary resources into calamities that may or may not occur, an investment that may only be cashed in on in the event of misfortune.

In this regard, insurance is somewhat counter-intuitive in a capitalist world because it essentially demands an investment into that which is undesirable and to be avoided at all costs, as opposed to most other kinds of speculation.⁷⁷ It may of course be said that one is “really” investing in the power to restore things to their previous state prior to the instance of misfortune, but this is not entirely true. Most people would not invest money into remunerating the damages of a future disaster that, at this historical juncture, appears altogether unlikely or even outlandish. Thus, one is actually betting on the *likelihood* of certain kinds of misfortune when one takes out an insurance policy, and the monthly premiums one pays are actually an investment of one’s money into *risk*. In this manner, insurance bureaucracies at both the private and the public levels

⁷⁷ See Ulrich Beck. *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995.

do more than establish schemes of coverage which protect the futurity of their clients. In addition to this, they also play a powerful part in determining which injuries and illnesses are legitimate and worthy of inclusion into the fold of insurance, meaning they provide legibility and give parameters to the more nebulous category of social risk. Considering that the determination of risks may often toe the line between the fantastic and the scientifically substantiated, insurance is compelled to decide which risks it will acknowledge by virtue of statistical calculation, a mode which generates a larger picture of collective phenomena through statistical data. This nexus between statistical truth, fantasy and scientific credibility is then applied to the necessary disruptions and ills of modernity as a palliative agent.

It is, of course, “risky” to invest money in almost anything, but this riskiness becomes altogether different when the investment is into risk itself. The chance remains that the investor might lose his or her money if it turns out that everything is fine and tragedy is averted, but this eventuality is most often preferred to actually “winning the bet” and receiving compensation for some misfortune. The calculus of insurance investment is thus: one takes the risk of investing money into the chance (like gambling) of risks becoming real, but is actually hoping to lose the bet. This may be an early stage of a “futures market” in which investors are compelled to bet against their own interests—one is either correct and receives a return on the investment or incorrect and is successful in other ways. According to the Online Business Dictionary and other authorities in the field of risk management, risk can be quantified; its value is defined as an “estimated quantity computed by multiplying the likelihood (probability) of the occurrence of a negative event by its likely impact in money terms.”⁷⁸ However, the critical-realist school within

⁷⁸ *Online Business Dictionary*. <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/risk-value.html>

the field of risk studies acknowledges that a significant part of what makes up certain kinds of risks is the stuff of the imagination. We might even be able to go as far to say that *risk, in itself, is always part-imaginary*, considering that risk fundamentally entails the uncertainty of outcome and thus can never reach full ontological consistency. In the first case, we have a risk-value that uses probability to calculate an economic quantity, seen especially in schemas used for determining whether something is a safe investment or not. However, the risk-value that I am describing here concerns the *economics of risk-imagination and risk-representation*, and refers to a direct link between partly-fictional scenarios and monetary investment.

This notion of risk-value “measures” the purchase of calamitous fantasies on the minds of citizens and the attitudes of institutions by how successful they are in attracting insurance money or in becoming adopted by the discourses of leading authorities who hold sway over large institutional budgets and public opinion. This value can be characterized by the effective, *literary* combination of realism and destructive fantasy—a combination which I think also falls under the genre heading of what I have been calling mythic realism. In this case, the value of a particular risk corresponds to how likely, how threateningly and how realistically it can be conveyed. Therefore, the risk value for present threats and unknown risks (those that have previously occurred, but whose future occurrence cannot be predicted) would tend to be higher whereas the value of completely unknown risks (or unknown-unknown risks in the language of Ulrich Beck)⁷⁹ would have a lower risk value. However, if a risk can be compellingly theorized (in the etymological sense of “seeing” or “divining”) or prophesied, it may then also come to possess a higher value in economic terms.

⁷⁹ Ulrich Beck. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 1992.

One question that emerges from these considerations concerns the anticipatory dimension of risk, which can still be parsed out using Ulrich Beck's framework of unknown vs unknown-unknown risk.⁸⁰ "The crucial point, however, is not only the discovery of the unknown unknowns, but that simultaneously the knowledge, control and security claim of state and society were, indeed had to be, renewed, deepened and expanded. The irony lies in the institutionalized security claim, to have to control something even if one does not know whether it exists!"⁸¹ In the latter, there is a risk which has no referent whatsoever in the empirical world, and may not necessarily be easily extrapolated from present circumstances. If a given value can then be attributed to such a kind of risk, then it would require a kind of fictional sketch in order to make that risk intelligible. Risk value appears on this horizon between futurity, imagination and economy, an exchange of wealth garnered from productive labor for imagined future calamity. In this sense, one can even be said to be purchasing the imagination of calamity, in monthly installments, with the hope of keeping it forever suspended beyond the threshold of reality.

What this puts into question is, for one, the general meaning of insurance and what it informs and polices. The purpose of insurance is explicitly to protect individuals and groups from the necessary instances of calamity that the modern world produces. Under a regime of statistical truth, accidents are not only likely to happen, but to a certain point, are actually expected to occur. The factual circumstances of how and when calamity may emerge will always remain unknown in advance, but the fact of its emergence, and sometimes even the quantity of its emergence, can be roughly calculated beforehand. Thus, insurance is designed to correspond to the measure of general calamity and risk present within a certain population, a quantity which

⁸⁰ Ulrich Beck. *World at Risk*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009.

⁸¹ Ulrich Beck. "Living in the World Risk Society." *Economy and Society*. 35. (2006) p.335

is then spread equally across all members of the population—a communalization of risk, if you will, which is present in both private and social insurance cultures. However, this “measure of general calamity” is always extremely subject to interpretation, distortion, and political power.

This communalization of risk also entails that insurance has some power in determining at a population-wide level which sicknesses and other kinds of misfortune are considered legitimate and worthy of compensation, as well as which ones are either the fault of the claimant or the product of his or her imagination. The stakes of this dynamic at the level of the larger collective suggest that insurance as a social force mediates between individuals and their afflictions, determining the validity and legitimacy of these afflictions. But the way it manages to do this is by one, proving scientifically whether or not certain afflictions exist, and two, by measuring the frequency with which they occur. This last point is important because it entails that if an affliction is either too common or too uncommon, it may not be covered by any insurance unless it can scientifically be proven without a doubt how pernicious it is. Thus, to some degree, insurance influences the way in which illnesses become considered “real” and acknowledged beyond the private state of experiencing symptoms. As a reconciliation between scientific truth-value and statistical reality, insurance helps to determine the reality and social acceptance of illness and other social problems.



Trauma within the Paradigm: Nervous Illness within a Bacteriologically-Defined Scientific Culture

The emergence of increased industrial and transportation accidents within the regulated spatiality of metropolitan Berlin was associated with increased social anxiety, in part because of the contradiction between an intractable insecurity within the city and the dream of a thoroughly calculated environment. As Wolfgang Schivelbusch writes about railway accidents in *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Space and Time*,⁸²

One might also say that the more civilized the schedule and the more efficient the technology, the more catastrophic its destruction when it collapses. There is an exact ratio between the level of the technology with which nature is controlled, and the degree of severity of its accidents. The pre-industrial era did not know any technological accidents in that sense...The pre-industrial catastrophes were natural events, natural accidents. They attacked the objects they destroyed from the outside, as storms, floods, thunderbolts and hailstones. After the Industrial Revolution, destruction by technological accident came from the inside. The technical apparatuses destroyed themselves by means of their own power. (131)

What this meant was that the smooth functioning of interwoven urban systems was capable of producing disasters that often exceeded the individual's capacity to process them. While the accidental horrors of the industrial world often dwarfed other kinds of man-made accidents in force and intensity, it was in many ways their supposed *unlikelihood* that created a quasi-hallucinatory experience for victims and witnesses, recalling encounters with the sublime brutality of the natural disaster. The discourses around shock within the psychiatric disciplines and within the public at large generated a kind of syndrome, which was suited to the scale of

⁸² Wolfgang Schivelbusch. *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

such horrendous events, although its validity as a medical disorder remained subject to intensive debate and doubt at different stages of its history. Shock was the result of an event so traumatic that it could reach beyond the realm of cognitive rationality to resurrect monstrosities and mysticisms thought to be extinguished by the march of enlightened progress. For the modern city-dweller, accidents mimic the disruptive power of nature, and in this manner take on a mythic aura when they appear.

Andreas Killen discusses how the exhibits at the Berlin Trade Exhibition of 1896⁸³ presented statistical data concerning insurance, industry and accidents.

Statistical tables documented the increasing reach of social insurance over the lives of the nation's workers; in 1894, according to one, the accident insurance system had considered 282,982 claims and awarded compensation in 69,619 cases. Such statistics demonstrated that industrial accidents could no longer be treated merely as unfortunate disruptions of the continuum of modern life; they were regular, even predictable, events, whose occurrence had to be integrated into a rationally planned system for protecting Germany's worker-citizens against the risks, shocks, injuries, and anxieties of modern life. (18)

The occurrence of a horrible accident may be shocking and traumatic, laying bare the power within the modern edifice for destruction, but what is also truly modern is the anticipation and expectation of the things which seem to go against modernity's dream. Such figures suggest that while the metropolis's expansion involved in an ever-expanding refinement of security and surveillance technologies to guarantee safety and predictability, there was an equally important tendency in urban organization to accommodate for an ineradicable insecurity that was also growing apace with urban and industrial expansion.

⁸³ Andreas Killen. *Berlin Electropolis: Shock, Nerves and German Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

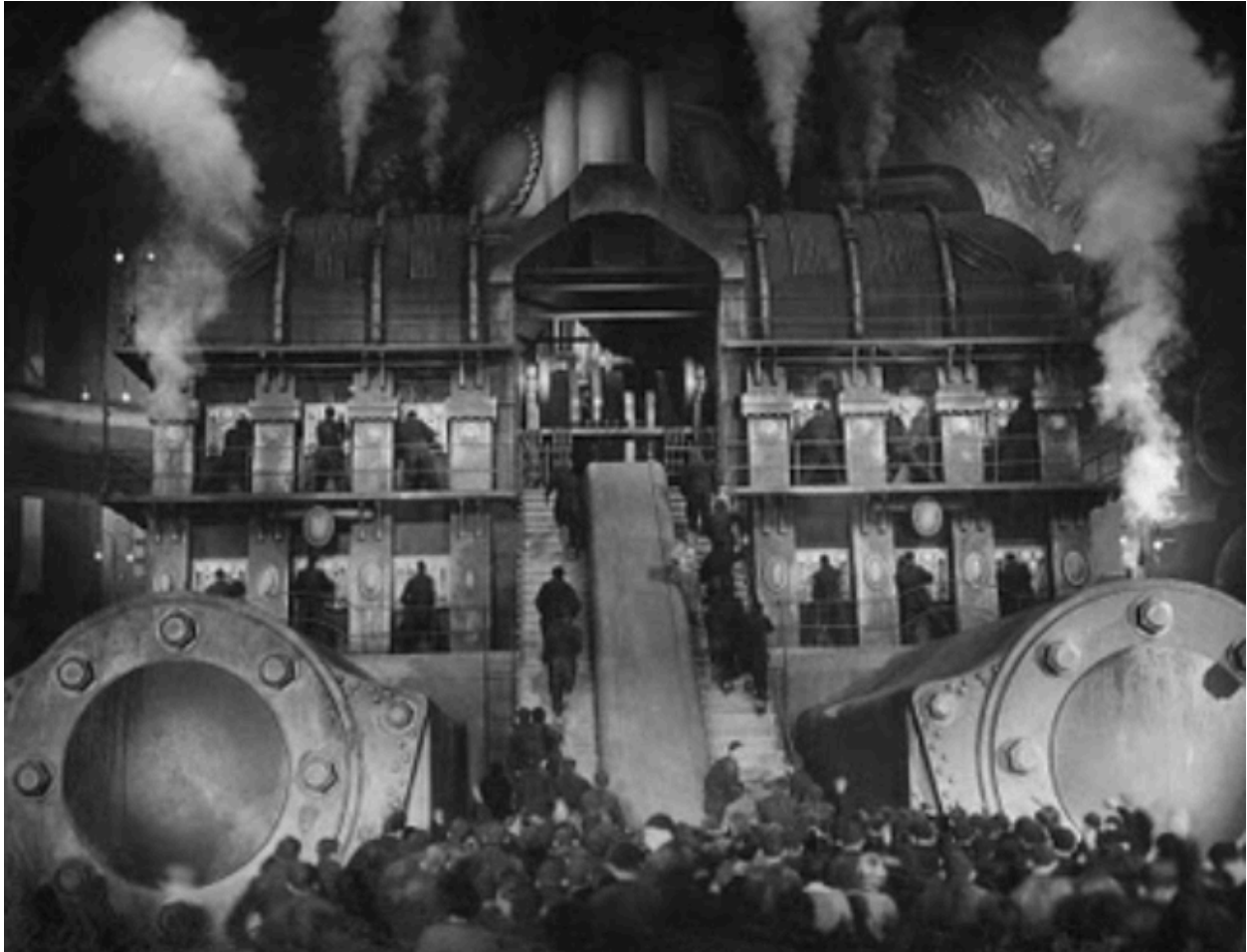
However, disruptions within the rationalized city, although anticipated, were still generally conceived from a bourgeois, technocratic standpoint to be simple “mistakes” and “errors” which would, with all likelihood, be expunged by the march of progress. As Ernst Jünger writes in *On Danger*:⁸⁴

The supreme power through which the bourgeois sees security guaranteed is reason. The closer he finds himself to the center of reason, the more the dark shadows in which danger conceals itself disperse, and the ideal condition which it is the task of progress to achieve consists of the world domination of reason through which the wellsprings of the dangerous are not merely to be minimized but ultimately to be dried up altogether. The dangerous reveals itself in the light of reason to be senseless and relinquishes its claim on reality. In this world all depends on the perception of the dangerous as the senseless, then in the same moment it is overcome, it appears in the mirror of reason as an error. This can be demonstrated everywhere and in detail within the intellectual and actual arrangements of the bourgeois world. It reveals itself at large in the endeavor to see the state, which rests on hierarchy, as society, with equality as its fundamental principle and which is founded through an act of reason. It reveals itself in the comprehensive establishment of an insurance system, through which not only the risk of foreign and domestic politics but also that of private life is to be uniformly distributed and thus subordinated to reason. It reveals itself further in the many and very entangled efforts to understand the life of the soul as a series of causes and effects and thus to remove it from an unpredictable into a predictable condition, therefore to include it within the sphere in which consciousness holds sway.

While this perspective accords with that of state management and the modern bourgeois, it differs quite sharply from personalized accounts of industrial accidents, in which rational description would easily give way to an almost religious language, emphasizing a disembodied experience within a ghastly realm of catastrophe. The eruption of “danger” and the “senseless” are not experienced merely as errors from the standpoint of the afflicted. Rather, they are

⁸⁴ Ernst Jünger. “On Danger.” *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*. Ed. Anton Kaes, Edward Dimendberg, and Martin Jay. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

traumatic events which often undermine a safe return of the individual to an experience of comfort in an otherwise calculable environment. The victims tend not only to emerge with physical damages from the incident; they often will also exhibit quite irrational behavioral symptoms that almost seem to be embodiments of the irrationality of the accident itself.

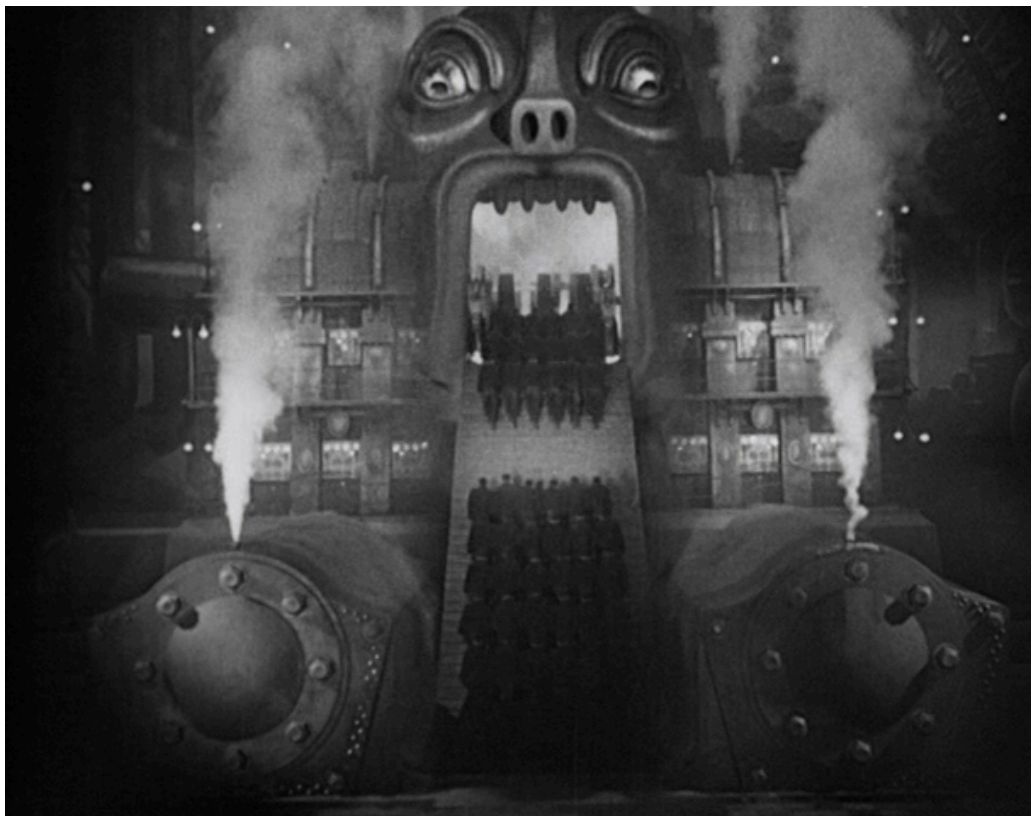


Metropolis. Dir. Fritz Lang. Ufa, 1927. Film. retrieved from <http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_v0fV15P7uQo/THzbcfrFqsl/AAAAAAAAIP0/6Z2W5Oa3Cew/s400/metro+moloch2.jpg>

In Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*⁸⁵ this entanglement of shock, industrial accidents and mysticism is duly explored. One of most enigmatic scenes in the film is when the protagonist Freder first descends through the tunnels to the machine-level of the city and witnesses a major accident in the M-Machine. The machine's demands exceeded the capacity of the labor force to

⁸⁵ *Metropolis*. Dir. Fritz Lang. Ufa, 1927. Film.

keep up, which eventually caused a meltdown. During this scene, Freder witnesses the violent thrashing of workers by the malfunctioning machine, and in the midst of this chaos, he sees the machine morph into the face of a dark, mythical monster which resembles an opened-mouthed, dragon-faced pyramid, whom he immediately recognizes and calls “Moloch” (a clear reference to an ancient Semitic god, who had a penchant for the regular sacrifice of children, and was otherwise considered a source of great evil that required continual appeasement.) In Freder’s vision, the injured workers are dragged in chains by masked thugs to be sacrificed within the bowels of this demon. Soon, the machine gradually returns to normal and the injured workers are eventually carried away and replaced by others. This scene is particularly important because we see Freder’s shock at the magnitude of such a horrific accident, which either causes him to hallucinate—or truly witness—the emergence of this mystical entity within the machine.



Metropolis. Dir. Fritz Lang. Ufa, 1927. Film. retrieved from <http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_MWCMNbK6afg/S6nempZv8BI/AAAAAAAAAXA/HzCn0rcyGjs/_s640lang_metropolis_moloch_2_stor.png>

However, after the incident, work seems to pick up again rather quickly, powered by a seemingly unending supply of laborers. This scene shows in one fell swoop the traumatic, shocking power of the accident, *as well as its apparent normality*. Here, the modern institutionalized sacrifice appears in mythic form, only to be covered up again by a work-flow whose detailed organization seems immune to such catastrophes. This is the domain in which insurance also operates: *the normalization of mythic disruptions that are truly incommensurable with rationalized industrial production*.

On the other hand, this scene demonstrates how a breakdown in the mechanized world allows for the emergence of the mythic, although it seems that the mythic may actually provide a means of perceiving the catastrophic. As Adorno and Horkheimer claim in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,⁸⁶ myth serves to mimic the power of nature and in the process, control it. Through the logic of human sacrifice, humans attempt to appease the senseless whims of the natural world by temporarily assuming their form. Although scientific rationality is thought to have triumphed over myth through enlightened progress, it appears in the film that sacrifices to the mythic world were still a requirement for the functioning of the modern productive edifice, and “Moloch,” the ghost in the machine, truly had to be appeased by the regular sacrifice of a supply of workers. It is also important to note that when father-capitalist Joh Fredersen learns of the malfunction from his son, he is enraged at Josephat, his second-in-command, as if something about the machine-accident should not be witnessed by the wrong people, as if it would give away a dangerous secret about hyper-capitalist production.

⁸⁶ Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1997

In Lang's film, the relationship between the triumph of mechanism and the return of a repressed vitalism as villainous monstrosity is quite powerful. The metropolis's demands upon its laboring class are so excessive that they exceed what the workers are capable of providing, while the labor itself is extremely robotic, demanding concentration upon very specific unchanging tasks (a mode of industrial labor that while it may open its doors to those without a skill-set, is also the result of Fordist and Taylorist models of labor efficiency.) In the end, what is really required is a class of robots to supply the labor for building and maintaining the city of the future, calling forth the idea of utopian automation, a fantasy which even Marx found to be the ultimate solution at the end of his life. However, when the "Man-Machine" was actually produced (in Rotwang's laboratory that resembled a pre-modern gothic hut in the middle of the big city, the remainder of an enchanted presence in the midst of rationalized big business) this robot's influence upon labor and the working class was shown to be quite different.

While the face of the robot was modeled on Maria, a figure of quasi-religious redemption for the working class in the bowels of the city, when the "Man-Machine" approached the workers, it worked to unleash their dissatisfaction and mobilize their destructive urges into a rebellion whose ultimate aim—one actually orchestrated by Joh Fredersen, the arch-capitalist of the city—was for the workers to destroy their own barracks in the worker city, including their own families within them. So, it turns out that realization of the most futuristic form of labor and energy efficiency, the "Man-Machine" also has the capacity to call forth the most "primitive" traits within the laboring classes, in which they function merely as a horde of primitive libidinal energy waiting to be orchestrated by a master, a master who may even convince them to do things which will ultimately destroy their capacity to subsist. Here, the automaton is uncanny

because its representation of the perfect realization of laboring mechanistic energy is also the release of the most primal unrefined energies within the lowest common denominator of the crowd. It remains unclear whether such a fantasy is merely the legacy of an anxiety around the latent destructive capacities of technological innovation (an anxiety which can be seen even in the earliest science fiction, such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*) which had only become intensified in the instance of modern technological warfare in WWI. While this synthesis of the barbaric and hyper-rationalized technology is an oft-invoked lens through which to view the functionality of National Socialism (which is most certainly referenced as a foreboding of what was to come when Lang made the film in 1929), it also acts as a cipher through which a certain undecidability around human labor emerges.

Another aspect of this scene within the film speaks to one of its other main thematics: the human as an appendage of the machine within the production process. Although, the workers struggle to keep up with the demands of the production process, it appears that this process is simply merciless and unrelenting. Regardless of the amount of effort the worker puts into his task, it is not possible for him to continue this effort over a long duration, which means that his eventual collapse due to fatigue is practically inevitable. In this regard, the film interrogates the intelligence of such an economic system, one in which labor-power is expended so flagrantly and mercilessly without regard to its health, as if it were in never-ending supply. In *The Human Motor*,⁸⁷ Anson Rabinbach discusses different theories of labor-power, emerging at the end of the 19th century, which fused economic thought with new principles in physics, all with the hope of

⁸⁷ Anson Rabinbach. *The Human Motor*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

minimizing—if not altogether eradicating—fatigue. This science of work did in many cases demonstrate that an improved overall health of the laboring pool would yield higher productivity.

At the 1907 Berlin Congress of Hygiene and Demography, scientists and other health experts from various countries considered proposals for a shorter working day. From the standpoint of social hygiene, the greater efficiency achieved by the elimination of overwork, by the shortening of the workday...would...enhance overall welfare and productivity. The German industrial hygienist Emmanuel Roth proclaimed that any reduction of the workday was desirable from a ‘hygienic standpoint’ as long as the gain in recouping the day’s energy (*Kraefteersatz*) from the longer rest period, or from the improved efficiency, remained greater than the energy consumed by ‘the intensification of the tempo of work. (219)

The calculus of such an industrial hygienist is, in the end, not the general well-being of the worker, but rather the maximum output of labor power. In Lang’s film, the inhumane treatment of the workers can also be seen as patently inefficient because for the worker it may be a better option to reach the limits of his capacities as early as possible in the workday, considering that this limit will have to be reached anyway, as the regime of production seems to necessitate it. In such circumstances, one might even be compelled to *fake* exhaustion in order to shirk work duties, indicating that slave-driving industrial production of Babylonian proportion ultimately does not win the maximum output of the workforce.

However, what we learn from multiple historical analyses of the German Welfare State is that the simulation of degenerative symptoms in order to receive insurance compensation became a widespread social problem (or was rather perceived as such by the medical and insurance bureaucracies of both Imperial and Weimar Germany.) At the time, a significant amount of both medical and insurance resources went into the determination of a claimant’s legitimacy in accepting compensation, especially in cases of nervous illness, which do not always have

“objectively verifiable” symptoms. However, the troubling presence of so-called simulation also brought up the issue of a kind of modern hypochondria, a *hypochondria which may need to be considered an illness in its own right*. Killen narrates a dynamic interplay between patient and doctor that actually *generates* the symptoms of particular disorders:

For the typical accident victim...the effects of the accident were nothing short of providential. In the course of being examined over and over again, both by his physicians and by himself, the patient gradually discovered ‘something in his body that he had not earlier noticed.’ Each new examination or careless utterance by the doctor acted as a stimulus to his imagination, strengthening the conviction that something in him had changed, until finally he ‘persuaded himself that “the accident,” that event which now represented a turning point in his life, had been the cause of all these conditions in his body.’⁸⁸

What Killen’s analysis reveals is that a strange relationship between affliction or triggering event, symptom, diagnosis and compensation existed around the turn of the century. It appears as though a strict chain of causality from affliction, to diagnosis to treatment and compensation was actually somewhat irregular; rather, this period was home to another kind of relationship between these variables. In some cases the possibility of receiving a pension brought about the appearance of symptoms by those “malingerers” attempting to profit from the fledgling social insurance system. In other cases, the attempts on the part of expert medical examiners under employ by railway or insurance companies to determine the veracity of nervous symptoms actually caused certain kinds of nervous disorders—to *the point where some would actually classify the application for accident compensation traumatizing in itself*. It is this strange network of causality between symptoms, diseases, and treatments that is at stake, a network which also changes the way the urban community is to be understood, in the sense that having,

⁸⁸ Andreas Killen. *Berlin Electropolis: Shock, Nerves and German Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006. p.113

or at least the potential to have, an illness has also become connected to being part of the social collective.

This network of non-linear causality has also been explored in regards to cases of “male hysteria” and shell-shock victims during the trench warfare of the first World War, most particularly in Paul Lerner’s *Hysterical Men: War, Psychiatry and the Politics of Trauma in Germany*.⁸⁹ This work attempts to address disease-emergence as a constellation of both social and biological factors in which networks of medical bureaucracy, the military, disease symptoms and the welfare state are imbricated during this historical moment to produce a veritable explosion of male hysteria cases. What emerges here is a particular kind of undecidability that calls into question the relationship between diseases and the performance of their symptoms, and how the emergence and defense of fledgling medical disciplines codifies new territory in disease classification. Or stated differently, the discovery of symptoms to make a diagnosis or to provide evidence within a medical argument often became difficult to distinguish from the “conjuring” of symptoms needed to make a particular claim. Issues of fraudulence inhered within a dynamic interplay between patient, doctor, medical paradigm, and insurance provider that made the ascription of blame difficult to determine.

Ian Hacking tackles a similar problem in his *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory*⁹⁰ in which he examines the emergence of Multiple Personality Disorder and its transformations and evolution as a “movement” which combines therapeutic models and theories, patient narratives, careerist doctors, and insurance bureaucracies. As Hacking states:

⁸⁹ Paul Lerner. *Hysterical Men: War, Psychiatry and the Politics of Trauma in Germany*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003.

⁹⁰ Ian Hacking. *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

“Who will finally own the illness: highly qualified clinicians with years of training, or a populist alliance of patients and therapists who welcome a culture of multiples and who cultivate personalities? The movement is perfectly capable of splitting. Stakes are high. Whatever health plan the America people settle for, coverage will be more universal. Who will pay for what?...There will certainly be no public funding for the motley assemblages of therapies that Putnam alludes to. So the economic interests of the grassroots therapists fundamentally diverge, for the first time, from those of the leading psychiatrists and psychologists in the field.” (53)

This quick sketch of the state that the multiple movement found itself in the early 1990's suggests that the survival of certain therapeutical practices necessitated underwriting and promises of coverage by insurance companies in order to continue expanding their base of medical knowledge and treatment programs. Hacking demonstrates the importance of the name-change from “multiple personality disorder” to “dissociative identity disorder,” as a change in a therapy, as well as in the grassroots-style in which the movement had until then operated. As Hacking states, “There has been a populist, grassroots air to the multiple personality movement. Many of the clinicians are not M.D.'s or Ph.D. psychologists but hold another credential—a master of social work degree, a nursing qualification, right down (in the pecking order) to people who have taken a couple of weekend courses in memory regression and are in no strict sense qualified at all.” (14) What this points to is the complex of social factors that go into the composition of a medical field, and the significance—or lack thereof—of particular qualifications in determining medical authority. A similar kind of influence over medical diagnosis can be seen in early 20th century in which social insurance institutions employed trained medical technicians in order to root out malingerers and to identify and corroborate certain kinds of symptoms as opposed to others.

In *Berlin Alexanderplatz*,⁹¹ Franz Biberkopf also finds himself later on in the novel in the psychiatric clinic at Berlin Buch, slightly north of the city center. During his tenure at the institution, he is examined by a variety of physicians who attempt to determine the nature of his disorder, and especially if it stems from physiological causes. This scene in the novel is also autobiographical, as Döblin himself was a neurologist at this same institution in the 1920's, and probably had to perform such examinations on a frequent basis. The undecidability of Franz's illness seems to be the main issue confronting the medical technicians, and becomes both a topic of interest and subject of anxiety for the old and young doctors because of its anomalous character. "The younger gentlemen have opinions of their own about this case: they are inclined to consider Franz Biberkopf's trouble as psychogenic, that is, his rigidity derives from his soul, it is a pathological condition of inhibitions and constraint which would be cleared up by an analysis (perhaps it emanates from earlier psychic levels)..." (592) These younger doctors appear to be interested in testing out the efficacy of psychoanalytic treatment in which congealed inhibitions can be talked out of existence. However, as Franz remains disinclined to speak to the specialists, they decide to try electric shock therapy. "One of the volunteers, therefore, insists on fetching an electrolytic machine from the ward across the way, and on galvanizing Franz Biberkopf, that is, the upper part of his body; and after that he directs the galvanic current particularly to the region of the jaws, throat and palate." (593) The older guard of the institution appears to be uncomfortable with the significance of new theories of psychogenic illness because, for one, the paradigm of external disease causation appears to be compromised, a paradigm which has clearly sustained him during his professional life. This section of the story

⁹¹ Alfred Döblin. *Berlin Alexanderplatz: The Story of Franz Biberkopf*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1997.

narrates a reticence on the part of the medical establishment to adopt new approaches not based on their scientific credibility but rather with the aim of professional protection.

The older doctor clearly belongs on the side of physiological and external causes of nervous disease. In his words: "...you may do whatever you please about the broken leg, but it won't be cured merely by talking, and piano-playing won't cure it either." (594) However, while this doctor is extremely dismissive of the notion of psychogenic etiology, this does not mean that he is altogether unwilling to accept the presence of the new and unprecedented, as he says, "...you remember what we learned during the epidemic of the so-called Spanish influenza, at least what we older men learned. We may perhaps find something sensational in the operating room, it wouldn't be the first time." (595) This reference to the influenza pandemic of 1918 explains that what was discovered as the microscopic cause of this global outbreak, which left upwards of 50 million people dead, was something heretofore unknown, and also technically not alive. The influenza virus was certainly an anomaly for the bacteriological paradigm; however, it in no way challenge the bedrock of positivistic disease causation, which was one of the major achievements of that scientific revolution.

The younger doctors insist upon psychogenic theories: "But he is inhibited, Chief, in our view it is a repression, conditioned by a psychic crisis, a loss of contact with reality, due to disappointments, failures, then infantile and instinctive demands on reality and a fruitless attempt to re-establish contact." (596) This psychoanalytical description of Franz's indeterminate illness relies upon the vocabulary of psychic inhibitions, which are somehow distilled out of experience and preserved somewhere within the individual's psyche. If repressive mechanisms of the psyche can be disrupted it is possible that the latent content of these inhibitions will manifest itself in

such a way to the patient that he may come to terms with them. This talking-cure, however, is equated with folk mysticism by the head doctor. “Psychic crisis, be damned! In that case he would have other psychic moments. He’d give up those repressions and inhibitions. He’s handing them to you as a Christmas present. In a week he’ll be up and about with your assistance, good lord you really are a master-healer, bravo for the new therapy, you can send a telegram of congratulations to Freud in Vienna...” (596) This somewhat vitriolic attack on psychoanalysis likens it to quackery, and as mere professional posturing, especially in light of the fact that he calls the young doctor a master-healer (in the German original, the term is “Gesundbeter,” and is more accurately translated as “faith-healer.”) Franz’s undecidable illness causes the medical institution to confront itself, and to come up against the boundaries of the dominant paradigm of the historical period in question, a time after World War I where thousands of soldiers had suffered from shell-shock and what was diagnosed as male hysteria.

As Paul Lerner emphasizes, however, the acknowledgement of psychogenic and psychosomatic illnesses during World War I often did lead to the use of medical techniques that could quite easily be compared with those of faith-healers. As he demonstrates in a discussion the techniques used by hypnotist and war psychiatrist Max Nonne, the deployment of suggestive techniques in the treatment of war neurosis was also construed as an innovative way of restoring the soldier-patient to a status free of nervous symptoms. “The mysterious, even miraculous elements of Nonne’s cure are conspicuous in light of the strict scientism that characterized early-twentieth-century German psychiatry and neurology. Equally noteworthy is Nonne’s use of film—a modern technologically advanced medium—to record and promote hypnosis, an old technique historically at odds with the modernity of scientific, university medicine. In a sense,

the film produced for the benefit of military officials and army medics, publicizes the introduction of magic into the therapeutic realm and marks the incorporation of crass sideshow antics into scientific mental medicine.” (87) This passage indicates that during the war, these methods were, for a brief period, more widely acceptable and even promulgated as a means of treatment to restore “damaged masculinity” to traumatized soldiers en masse. Here such cures were expedients in defense of the nation, eventually were combined with electro-shock therapy to yield the most fruitful results. However, their overall application beyond wartime forced them to come up against the regulatory behemoth of insurance bureaucracy.

The cross-pollination between medical science and social insurance developed in response to the mandate of Bismarck’s welfare state (Sozialstaat) which sought to douse the rising flames of socialist rebellion by establishing protective and more equitable social policies.⁹² Bismarck’s economic liberalism was more easily accepted by the laboring masses due to the provision of social insurance in his government. In this regard, risk and its interpretations became much more connected to a larger picture of society. “Social insurance rested on a momentous redefinition of the nature of risk in the modern world. The new laws defined risk in mechanized industry as a social rather than an individual burden and institutionalized this definition through a system that collectively redistributed the burden. The implicit trade-off of this socialization of risks was the obligation to become healthy and productive. In projecting a more rational form onto industrial society, social insurance defined a new social body in place of the individual body of the bourgeois patient.”⁹³ It seems that insurance developed a picture of the

⁹² See Greg Eghigian; Andreas Killen; Christine Leuenberger. “Introduction: The Self as Project: Politics and the Human Sciences in the 20th Century.” *Osiris*. 22. (2007). pp.1-25

⁹³ Andreas Killen. *Berlin Electropolis: Shock, Nerves and German Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006. p.89

manifold social conditions in which individuals found themselves, calculated down to numbers and percentages. This itemized normative picture of objective circumstances allowed one, in theory, to practice normative, fair compensation for those who were arbitrarily afflicted by the necessary ills of modern society. The spirit of social insurance was that the community at large would help shoulder the individual burden, provided that the individual could demonstrate that he was merely a casualty of circumstances and that his misfortune derived in no direct manner from his actions and decisions.

This rationing of necessary collective misfortune is aptly described by Foucault in his lectures in *Security, Territory, Population* in which he states that governing authorities in the 19th century shifted their strategies away from disciplinarity over to a logic of security.⁹⁴ This meant that rather than trying to prevent calamity through increased social control, modern governmentality would acknowledge that, at the level of the population, some percentage of calamity and misfortune must necessarily exist. When this became a numerically known quantity, it could be mitigated against. The undesirable quantity could hopefully be reduced through better governance, redirected productively or simply compensated for as a necessary bi-product of modern progress, a bi-product that should be monitored, but not outright prevented. Insurance profits on the statistical fact of this quantum of suffering because it remains unknown where it will occur. With such a guiding philosophy of governance, industrial production and profits would not need to be overly hampered by safety concerns, new technologies could be implemented without immediate regard for their hazardous side-effects. As long as some network

⁹⁴ Michel Foucault. *Security, Territory, Population*. New York: Picador, 2007.

of protection existed to insure the fitness and overall health of the collective pool of labor power, industrial advances could pursue endeavors freely with as of yet undefined risk potentials.

However, the hegemonic rise of this refined calculus of social factors along a spectrum of probability also contained its own power to influence and shape the very social reality it claimed to represent.⁹⁵ This occurred in a variety of ways, particularly in regard to how collective labor power was shepherded by a fledgling welfare state, but also in how misfortune was assessed and compensated for, including the issues of simulation and symptom diagnosis addressed above. It appears as though the governing attitude toward modern civilizational change was shaped by an understanding that “chance” was a factor that must be acknowledged because it could not be eradicated. This relationship to chance is also intimately connected to a paradigm shift in modern medicine due to the discovery of the microbe as a discreet causal agent of particular diseases. A generalized hygiene model could help limit the capability of microorganisms to spread into certain environments, but this notion of hygiene immediately demonstrated its own virtual impossibility because the modern urban environment, imbricated with so many intersecting lives, practices, and conveyances was also a substrate upon which one malevolent organism could propagate undetected and undermine the health of even the most fastidious hygienic practitioners. In this sense, a dialectic of containment and contagion became visible.

Modern governmentality allows for the localization of pathogens, and their etiological networks, social and biological, and acknowledges their almost natural inevitability; however, these systems which calculate the numerical presence of discreet pathogenic entities are not able to easily process *synergistic causation* within such a large body of data. In this case, discreet

⁹⁵ See Ian Hacking *The Taming of Chance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

calculation may actually *mask* latent vulnerabilities within a system that are potentially catastrophic. When these vulnerabilities emerge in all their entanglements, they often exhibit anomalous behavior that cannot be easily rationalized by the hard sciences, and in this way take on a “spectro-mythical” form. The emergence of the spectro-mythical and its mode of contagion within the rationalized edifice is akin to the revenge of the detail within a statistician’s projection which was thought to have its own particular calculated position, but when seen in an uncanny light proves to be within radical entanglements with many unexpected components of the system. The irrational emergence designates above all the impossibility of being simply counted among many.

In debates around the turn of the century concerning the nature of hysteria, the question as to whether its etiology was due to particular stresses or shocks within the environment, an endogenous disposition or heredity on the part of the patient, or some mixture of the two was important not purely for medical reasons. An entire political economy of social insurance was connected to it as well, in that compensation would be awarded to victims or witnesses of accidents or other urban disasters if it could be shown their symptoms were caused by an external agent. While this logic is sensible and protective from the standpoint of social insurance, it is also quite a new phenomenon considering the history of disease pathology, and especially within the discipline of psychiatry. What I mean by this is that the notion that diseases are caused by discrete external agents is a radically new perspective on disease-emergence altogether which came as a result of the movement initiated by Pasteur and Koch.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ John M. Barry. *The Great Influenza: The Epic Story of the Deadliest Plague in History*. New York: Penguin Books, 2005.

Prior to the developments within bacteriology, there were theories about the external causes of disease, such as miasma, but bacteriology made the cause discrete and localizable. When applied to diagnoses of traumatic hysteria, this meant that while an individual may be predisposed to the disease, this disease required a trigger, or “agent provocateur,” to release the disease from its latent state. Attempts to understand trauma shifted rapidly during this time with high stakes because victims shown to be traumatized by industrial and railway accidents could receive a pension. But this entailed that some aspect of the experience, some shocking vibration, however minute, would have to have been ingested by the human organism in such a way as to effect the multiple symptoms of traumatic neurosis. In this regard, one could go as far as to say that a bacteriological paradigm with external agents of causation, however invisible they may have been (such as sound frequency, pressures of the physical world, or microbes) for one, enabled the emergence of a regime of compensation for psychiatric disorders, but on the other hand eventually disabled this same regime because there was no manner of measuring a “traumata,” as one could actually measure the presence of bacteria.

This indeterminacy concerning the etiology of certain nervous conditions can be summed up by the debates as to whether pathological behavior had endogenous origins or was actually the manifestation of latent trauma in the psychic organism. As Lerner states,

Oppenheim’s traumatic neurosis diagnosis, which established a direct connection between traumatic shock and post-traumatic symptoms, led to the acceptance of trauma-induced conditions as worthy of insurance compensation...Most German psychiatrists came to oppose Oppenheim’s ideas out of a combination of scientific and economic concerns, which drew rhetorical power from the heated backlash against the early welfare measures Bismarck introduced in the 1880’s. And out of the opposition to Oppenheim, in a medical crusade laden with subtle anti-Semitism and

clamorous nationalism, hysteria became the diagnosis of choice for post-traumatic suffering in peace and war.⁹⁷ (9)

At this time, it appears that the diagnosis of hysteria attributed nervous symptoms to factors originating within the individual and his or her mind, or as Strümpel, another contemporary, claimed, hysteria was a collection of symptoms whose *causes were ideas*. This meant that even if individuals were involved in potentially traumatic situations, they could be denied coverage if their symptoms were shown to have originated from their own psyches.

In K. Codell Carter's article, *Germ Theory, Hysteria, and Freud's Early Work in Psychopathology*,⁹⁸ he discusses particularly how the discourses of bacteriology and pathology had become dominant within the medical establishment to such a degree that it became natural to adopt their language and concepts even for phenomena that could not be located within specific organs in the body. Freud's contribution to an understanding of psychiatric disorders cannot be downplayed, especially because he offered an explanation of their causes which at that time had continually eluded other practitioners even though they understood behavior and symptoms extremely well. This orientation towards etiology does have a larger background in the medical establishment as a whole.

With the adoption of germ theory the situation changed radically. First, precise studies conclusively identified infestations of micro-organisms as a specific cause of sets of symptoms. Next, the presence or absence of a particular micro-organism or of its associated antibodies became the definitive criterion for the disease associated with that micro-organism. The referents of specific disease names were gradually changed from sets of symptoms to cases of infestation by

⁹⁷ Paul Lerner. *Hysterical Men*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003.

⁹⁸ K. Codell Carter. "Germ Theory, Hysteria, and Freud's Early Work in Psychopathology." Medical History. 24. (1980): 259-274.

the micro-organism. In this way the meanings of the names of infectious diseases were systematically changed. (260)

This describes an overall shift in medical discourse away from manifestation to cause, or rather, that diseases became less and less classified by their relationship to their effects, but rather by the external agents that precipitated them. Carter's article explores the implications of this discursive shift for the psychiatric disciplines. The model of disease classification which resulted from the hegemony of bacteriology had different implications for hysteria (an "age-old" disease whose appearance in any historical era was quite difficult to explain, as its symptoms could be so multiple and its causes so difficult to pin down.) Research on hysteria by Charcot, for example, resulted in the explanation that hysteria could have many causes, which of course, indicated a problem for its disease classification. While some of his conclusions may be disputed, Freud did provide a causal explanation behind hysteria, and this explanation's formal logic can also be understood in the context of germ theory. "We now see certain parallels between Freud's approach to psychopathology and work that was being done at about the same time in the pathology of infectious diseases. At least initially Freud and Breuer saw their work as closely associated with the positions of Möbius and Strümpel, and they, in turn, saw their work as modeled on germ theory. Möbius and Strümpel explicitly set out to do for the nervous disorders what had been accomplished in the infectious diseases by using an etiological approach." (268)

For Freud, hysteria also had external origins, as a sexual disturbance, which had gone through a latent phase in childhood only to emerge again with manifold symptoms after adolescence as hysteria.⁹⁹ Hysterical symptoms may then be triggered by an external event without said event being the actual medical *cause* of such symptoms, and because diseases at this

⁹⁹ Freud, Sigmund. *The Major works of Sigmund Freud*. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica In., 1952.

time came to be increasingly defined by their causes, one could determine the difference between hysteria and traumatic neurosis. Thus, it appears that the germ theory paradigm had a deadlock on disease etiology in such a way that all causes that could not easily be measured as discreet external agents were considered to be endemic to the medical subject's disposition and thus beyond the purview of insurance coverage. This also entailed that the discursive shift of germ theory, problematizing a distinction between external and internal causation, is deeply entwined with the issues of fraudulence and "malingering" associated with medical insurance. The medical construction of the germ, as a micro-organism which lives in certain environments and can be seen with a microscope also suggested that with a different set of technical apparatuses a similar discrete entity of shock and trauma could be located within the human organism. Although it became clear through autopsies that no discernible damage had been inflicted upon the internal organs in cases of *neuraesthesia*, there was a veritable explosion of new medical techniques used by medical insurance practitioners to determine whether a shock was truly present within the body. Apparently traces of this discreet agent of shock could be found if one knew how to outsmart the mimicry of fraudulent claimants. But what kind of mimicry is this?

We examined in the last chapter how Malte's neurosis was perceived by him as a hostile takeover of his faculties by some anonymous other, an other which expressed itself through the attributes of its host, lacking any of its own. This entails that the very modality of the disease is mimicry; the disease's mode of infection is a mimicry of attributes of its host.¹⁰⁰ In these cases of so-called fraud, we have what appears to be the opposite: people mimicking the medically-determined properties of diseases, properties which themselves have already been gathered

¹⁰⁰ Rainer Maria Rilke. *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

statistically by physicians and scientists as a bundle of symptoms to be placed under the heading of a particular disease concept. What connects these two kinds of mimicry appears to be a modality of contagion: *the emergence of diseases which mimic the characteristics of their hosts could be seen as contagious because they either compelled others to behave immorally by pretending to have the same symptoms or through a matrix of social-suggestion, substantiated by various medically authorities, they somehow began to conjure up such symptoms out of thin air* (this roughly approximates some of the dominant ideologies of degeneration.)¹⁰¹ A disease's contagiousness in this sense was also connected to its performativity. The first case, exemplified by Malte, emphasizes an undecidability as to whether he actually had a disorder or was just possibly too sensitive to his own ideas—a sensitivity which eventually became a disorder. The second case also shows an undecidability as to whether a disease is merely being performed by a display of the correct symptoms, or if those symptoms are at all “real” and correspond to a real disorder—or, even further, *if the pressure to perform or “fake” the symptoms of the disease is actually a result of the disease itself*. This modality of contagion progressively evolved into a eugenicist argument: sick, crazy people with weak dispositions who can't work, but most likely won't be compensated, infect the rest of the population by compelling them to act like sick, crazy people with weak dispositions who don't want to work and are trying to get compensated. The specter of nervous illness, although disrobed of any claim to external causation, still appears from a biopolitical standpoint to be contagious and transmissible throughout the social body, but in a moral and sociological, rather than biological, manner. In this regard, simulation of statistically determined symptoms of nervous illness can actually be said to produce a partly-

¹⁰¹ See Sheila Faith Weiss. *Race Hygiene and National Efficiency: The Eugenics of Wilhelm Schallmeyer*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.

mythological disease that is somehow extra-biologically contagious. As a result of individuals simulating, or appearing to simulate, the new paradigmatic criteria of an illness, the illness somehow starts to behave irrationally, in sheer discrepancy with the scientific truths, and manages to hit the taproot of a mythic fear. Thus, it can be said that the simulation of distilled scientific truths may generate mythic specters which haunt modern society.

This conundrum plagued the German welfare state because its very attempt to mollify the “degeneration” of its work force also led to the degeneration of its workforce,¹⁰² which hints at another kind of accumulation during this period, alongside that of massive industrial wealth. Here we can see an accumulation of risk value in the sense that the imagination of nervous disease (and the nervous diseases which are produced by the imagination) equates to a monetary value or a temporary cessation of toil. The insurance against degeneration in place to protect the overall health of German labor power also carried scenarios and fantasies of degeneration within it, scenarios which have been itemized and documented by medical technicians that investigated and treated these illnesses, but in this case it appears that these fantasies of degeneration, through some of power of suggestion either “infected” the population in a semiotic transmission or enticed workers to emulate them.



Infrastructural Anxiety and Risk-Fantasy in Kafka's "Der Bau"

Risk is a phenomenon which falls outside the complete grasp of scientific rationality as well as the literary sphere, but in many ways, it really may be considered a zone of their radical

¹⁰² See Greg Eghigian. *Making Security Social: Disability, Insurance, and the Birth of the Social Entitlement State in Germany*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2000.

interpenetration in some space partially connected to futurity. This is interesting in light of Ernst Bloch's theory of the expectant emotions,¹⁰³ which apparently are situated in the present, but are fundamentally sensitive to the rumblings of a not-yet existent future. Anxiety is a key exemplar of the expectant emotions, and may be the psychological corollary of the more social category of risk. In this regard risk may be an object of experience that is sensed in other ways than as with immediate danger because a part of what makes up risk does not yet belong to the domain of reality, a kind of indeterminacy mixed with palpable expressions of danger concocted in the mind. However, within the domain of risk, there are subdivisions, as defined by Ulrich Beck and other theorists of risk. In a discussion of a three-tiered classification of types of risk, Elke Krahman states,

The third category is 'unknown-unknown' risks. They concern dangers with a very low probability or where the probability is unknown because there are no previous experiences of such hazards.

Unknown-unknown risks are incalculable future dangers. Unknown-unknown risks are also outside the individual or collective experience of anybody. Instead, unknown-unknown risks are identified through speculation. They are 'not so much the theoretical exploration of the unknown, as an exercise of the imagination.' Despite a low probability, unknown-unknown risks can be high on public and political agendas because of their, albeit equally speculative, devastating consequences. These imagined consequences gain credibility through "worst-case narratives and disaster rehearsals."

Examples of unknown-unknown risks include the danger of new chemical or biological weapons or the development of new strategies of destruction by transnational terrorists.¹⁰⁴

These kinds of risks remain inherently speculative, until they occur, but before they do, it is equally impossible to assess the credibility of such risks because there is no previous evidence to base claims upon. Krahman continues to explain that it is often experts who are responsible for

¹⁰³ Ernst Bloch. *The Principle of Hope (Vol. 1)*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995.

¹⁰⁴ Elke Krahman. *The Commodification of Security in the Risk Society*. School of Sociology, Politics, and International Studies, University of Bristol. Working Paper No. 06-08

describing, clarifying, if not inventing such risks, and it is precisely the authority invested within their expertise that give them the opportunity to make speculations that often have extremely significant political and economic consequences. “Due to the futurity of unknown and the incalculability of unknown-unknown risks, it is impossible to prove experts wrong. In a reversal of Beck it can be argued that expert prognoses of risk and insecurity cannot be refuted even by the absence of actual accidents because the risk discourse is based on a set of speculative assumptions and moves exclusively within a framework of probability statements.” (3) In many ways though, it is important to focus a bit more closely on this concept of speculation because it does, in this industry as in many others, refer to both the accumulation of profits based on guesses about the future, as well as the attempt to explain and theorize that which has not yet been—or may never be—proved.

Speculation with regard to private insurance involves the opening of new markets in two respects. One, by the extension and sale of insurance policies to those who previously had none, and two, by the determination of new risks, which may then be insured and peddled to people who may already have other kinds of insurance. When it comes to the insurance of unknown-unknown risks, it appears that the “speculative” possibilities are only bounded by the imagination, in that new risks, heretofore inconceivable, may be invented/discovered and used as a source of new insurance revenue. This risk revenue would then correspond to conclusions drawn not from history, but rather from fantasy, and in this regard we must see that the value itself (and its capacity to increase by reaching more and more markets) is directly proportional to the purchase the fantasy has on the minds of potential buyers. Thus, the more vivid, descriptive, and thorough a fantasy or scenario is thought up and buttressed with support that conveys

enough “reality,” the higher the value of this fantasy will be on the market because more people will have “bought” it. This risk speculation appears very similar to the work of the novelist who takes known conditions and makes his or her fantasy appear possible within them, a realist literary approach that is applauded for its ability to transmit the “feel” of reality, even though it is the stuff of imagination.

However, there are important examples of where the work of the novelist and the insurance agent intersect—most powerfully in the work of Franz Kafka. In many ways, Kafka’s writings can be seen as exemplars of this kind of realism. Kafka’s work is continually praised for precisely this ability to convey the grain and texture of reality in a fictional context which otherwise appears to be fantastical and often non-sensical. This contradiction seems to explain the enigmatic charisma of his sentences, which place the reader in haunting proximity to a feeling of reality, while simultaneously alienating him or her to fullest by forcing him or her to an encounter a succession of absurd creatures, irrational bureaucrats, and orientation-defying spatialities. Of course, alongside this, it must be addressed that Kafka himself was not only a writer; in fact, although extremely driven by this pursuit, he actually spent significantly less time on it than on the tasks of his proper occupation, which was as a claims adjuster of the Worker’s Accident Insurance Institution in Prague.

His occupational identity, as *Beamter*, was also something that he struggled with because the very nature of an official life demanded much more than the diligence required to faithfully execute one’s duties. The occupation of *Beamter* within the insurance bureaucracy of the Austro-Hungarian empire demanded a specific temperament and a strong identification with the virtues of orderliness and thoroughness in order to thwart even minor disruptions that might occur in the

course of one's work. If faithfully performed, one could assure oneself of a decent living, as well as social stature, providing professional security and upward mobility that certainly could not be found in the "cultural professions." This security could easily explain the attraction of such a career. However, as we see in recent Kafka scholarship by the likes of Stanley Corngold and Richard Heinemann (along with an edition of Kafka's *Office Writings*¹⁰⁵ translated into English) it appears that Kafka's participation in bureaucracy within his official life was not simply perfunctory, but was characterized by a reverence and awe for official duties, alongside a solid, diligent work ethic. Kafka did of course wrestle with these two identities, that of *Beamter* vs. that of *Schriftsteller*, but it would be a mischaracterization to say that bureaucracy represented for Kafka only the abasement of the human spirit in a Sisyphean battle against insecurity. As Heinemann writes:

Weber modifies the classical anthropological conception of myth as a projection of human fears and desires, implying that under the guise of anonymity modern institutions have taken on the supranatural force of the ancient gods. In this quasi-Nietzschean view, the human predilection for order is allied with the predilection for disorder, for the imaginative reconstruction of conflicting motivations. Bureaucracy thus becomes comprehensible not only as a supremely efficient mode of social and economic organization but also as the institutional manifestation of nonrational processes (Mommsen 398.)¹⁰⁶

This interpretation of bureaucracy using Weber and Mommsen indicates that the bureaucratic impulse for order and security may appear as something altogether different, almost quasi-mythical, when conceived in its totality. The functioning of bureaucratic systems may also be the "institutional manifestation of nonrational forces."

¹⁰⁵ *Franz Kafka: The Office Writings*. Ed. Stanley Corngold, Jack Greenberg, and Benno Wagner. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

¹⁰⁶ Richard Heinemann. *Kafka's Oath of Service: "Der Bau" and the Dialectic of Bureaucratic Mind*. PMLA Vol. 111, No. 2 (Mar., 1996), pp. 256-270

This observation makes sense in light in some of our previous discussions concerning insurance and its proximity to an incommensurable world of danger and mythical catastrophe. This subterranean intermingling between the forces of order and mythical, nonrational processes is a dynamic that Kafka appears to have wrestled with in his personal life. We, of course, see these same thematics played out in his major works, as his protagonists come up against the strange, mystical functionality of the some most “disenchanted” forms of modern authority. But, it appears that this tension became personified in the protagonist character himself after Kafka had left Prague and his official life and moved to the Grunewaldstrasse in Berlin where he wrote “Der Bau.”¹⁰⁷ This story unpacks the sheer irrationality inherent within a drive towards security by focusing on a mole-like character’s relationship to a labyrinthine underground castle which he built to protect himself from multiple, yet anonymous enemies. The mole’s first-person narration (a departure from the third-person objective narrator found in Kafka’s longer works) explains all of his elaborate rituals and strategies of self-preservation within the burrow, projecting at the outset an image of extreme security and impregnability. But, quite early in the narration it also appears that the narrator is plagued by the dogged anxieties that his measures were not thorough enough in deterring potential intruders. Thus, although, safer than could be imagined, the mole is horribly paranoid and sensitive to insecurity to the point where he even admits that he might feel safer outside the burrow.

The mole exists in a state of perpetual tension between security and absolute panic. It is as if the only way he can sustain the kind of security that he demands is to live in close imaginative proximity to devastating invasions and disasters that spell an end to his burrow and the safety it

¹⁰⁷ Franz Kafka. *The Complete Stories*. New York: Schocken, 1971.

provides. It seems that this creature truly possesses the virtues of a good *Beamter*, especially in light of his *Berechnungskunst*. As Heinemann says,

Beamtengeist is a neurotic obsession with security, a predisposition to protect oneself by making calculations rather than acting: "calculating who you should become." In "Berechnungskunst" 'art of calculation' the capacity to act, which belongs to the present, is perpetually delayed by anticipation of future circumstances. Bureaucratic mind thus entails an extreme sense of provisionality, or *Vorlaeufigkeit*, a sense that the present is merely a function of an ambiguous future both secure and threatening. Yet the notion that the future can be controlled through the art of calculation is misguided, for there are always more dangers to circumvent. Provisionality inevitably gives way to deferral, or *Nachtraeglichkeit*—the characteristically Kafkaesque zeal for explication that postpones action until all possible contingencies have been accounted for...¹⁰⁸
(259)

In this regard, *Berechnungskunst* entails a fundamental openness to the indeterminacy of the future, along with an inability to act within the present. It appears that this mole lives in state of conscious provisionality in which the future stands just beyond the threshold of perception as both secure and threatening. This valued quality of the art of calculation in the bureaucratic official suggests that the official, although weak in action, may be quite powerful in imagination—a characterization which surely goes against the image of the bureaucrat as rule-bound and unimaginative. Although it is his express objective to maintain order and preserve security, the official must be able to mentally process nightmare scenarios on a regular basis, which presents a stark departure from a secure predictable reality. This is especially true in the field of accident insurance because the everyday duties of such an official include the reviewing of briefs and statements that are often filled with grisly depictions of accidents in which horrible injuries and

¹⁰⁸ Richard Heinemann. *Kafka's Oath of Service: "Der Bau" and the Dialectic of Bureaucratic Mind*. PMLA Vol. 111, No. 2 (Mar., 1996), pp. 256-270

death occur. The official who exhibits an unblemished, hygienic exterior is here quietly absorbed with the horrors of modernity.

This clarity of imagination can be seen in the following passage in *The Burrow*:

And the danger is by no means a fanciful one, but very real. It need not be any particular enemy that is provoked to pursue me, it may very well be some chance innocent little creature, some disgusting little beast which follows me out of curiosity, and thus, without knowing it, becomes the leader of all the world against me; nor need it be even that, it may be—and that would be just as bad, indeed in some respects worse—it may be someone of my own kind, a connoisseur and prizier of burrows, a hermit, a lover of peace, but all the same a filthy scoundrel who wishes to be housed where he has not built. If he were actually to arrive now, if in his obscene lust he were to discover the entrance and set about working at it, lifting the moss; if he were actually to succeed, if he were actually to wriggle his way in in my stead, until only his hindquarters still showed; if all this were actually to happen, so that at last, casting all prudence to the winds, I might in my blind rage leap on him, maul him, tear the flesh from his bones, destroy him, drink his blood, and fling his corpse among the rest of my spoil, but above all -- that is the main thing -- were at last back in my burrow once more.¹⁰⁹

This fantasy of intrusion is both vivid and vague. In the first case, the enemy appears to be an unwitting one, who simply follows the mole into the burrow, but in so doing becomes “the leader of all the world against me,” another enemy which remains not only anonymous, but also anomalous because it cannot be effectively imagined. In the second case, the enemy is none other than a double of himself, who naturally wants the same things that he does. It is somewhat astonishing that this second, vividly described enemy, who resembles himself, is the one he imagines destroying and “drinking his blood.” It appears then from this example that his worst enemy is either something that he cannot clearly imagine or it is clearly himself. Could it be that

¹⁰⁹ Franz Kafka. *The Complete Stories*. New York: Schocken, 1971.

he is the one who is the biggest threat to his own security because he is the one who spends so much time imagining this threat, a threat which can never reach full ontological consistency. “I almost screw myself to the point of deciding to emigrate to distant parts and take up my old comfortless life again, which had no security whatever, but was one indiscriminate succession of perils, yet in consequence prevented one from perceiving and fearing particular perils, as I am constantly reminded by comparing my secure burrow with ordinary life.” (212) Here, he imagines an escape from his security in which he will no longer be plagued by imaginary threats that he invents in his mind; rather, he would have to contend with real threats in a dangerous world. In this story, regardless of how accurate his imagination of disaster may be, it is still always the product of his imagination. But he certainly is aware of the anxieties he lives with.

Now the truth of the matter—and one has no eye for that in times of great peril, and only by a great effort even in times when danger is threatening—is that in reality the burrow does provide a considerable degree of security, but by no means enough, for is one ever free from anxieties inside it? These anxieties are different from ordinary ones, prouder, richer in content, often long repressed, but in their destructive effects they are perhaps much the same as the anxieties that existence in the outer world gives rise to. (215)

The protective infrastructure which he has built to cater to his present and future survival also produces anxieties which he admits to be not so dissimilar in terms of their destructive capacity from those generated outside the burrow. This infrastructure must be considered a major cause of the psychological instability in which the mole forces himself to dwell, even though the actual dangers he faces stem more from his own behavior that is also by and large determined by the preservation and protection of the burrow.

The most significant dangers that we are confronted with in the story, dangers which present the most credible threat against the safety of the burrow, stem from the uncontrolled

actions of the mole, in which he gives into the unruly surges of his own desire. While excessively vigilant and overly-cautious about his own behavior most of the time, there are also instances in which his discipline reaches its limits, and becomes limp in the face of the desire to simply gorge himself on his food reserves, an activity that also results in him forgetting to fully secure his fortress. These instances would clearly demonstrate, especially if statistically examined over a longer period of time, that his own paraphraxes prove to be the biggest weaknesses in his security.

Then I usually enjoy periods of particular tranquility, in which I change my sleeping place by stages, always working in toward the center of the burrow, always steeping myself more profoundly in the mingled smells, until at last I can no longer restrain myself and one night rush into the Castle Keep, mightily fling myself upon my stores, and glut myself with the best that I can seize until I am completely gorged. Happy but dangerous hours; anyone who knew how to exploit them could destroy me with ease and without any risk. (209)

The mole is usually in a state of exaggerated discipline, constantly denying himself pleasure and gratification, a mode of functioning under the reality-principle which leads to the hoarding of food-stuffs, here shown to be an obsessive behavior, which is also the very possession which puts him at risk. The protection of his wealth is one of the central reasons behind the building and maintenance of such a fortress, but in this passage above, it appears that he must also protect his own wealth from himself, and in the process expose himself to external dangers by not appropriately guarding his chambers. In the end, the reasons for the existence of the burrow are its biggest weaknesses because his enjoyment of his wealth makes him truly vulnerable.

While being the screen for the projection of anxieties and risk-fantasies, the infrastructure of the burrow also seems to be imbued with the dangers that it is there to prevent, especially in sectors which are incomplete or deficient.

If on my customary rounds I avoid this part of the burrow, the fundamental reason is that the sight of it is painful to me, because I don't want to be perpetually reminded of a defect in my house, even if that defect is only too disturbingly present in my mind. Let it continue to exist ineradicably at the entrance; I can at least refuse to look at it as long as that is possible. If I merely walk in the direction of the entrance, even though I may be separated from it by several passages and rooms, I find myself sensing an atmosphere of great danger, actually as if my hair were growing thin and in a moment might fly off and leave me bare and shivering, exposed to the howls of my enemies.

(210)

Here, the burrow itself literally causes his hair to stand on end, one of the strongest instinctual signs of fear. The “atmosphere” which this part of the burrow produces is one which makes him deathly afraid to the point where his own hair has abandoned his body, leaving him naked and vulnerable to the sounds of his enemies. Here, the spectrality of infrastructure is truly capable of paralyzing him with fear.



Expressionism and the Biological Uncanny

The expressionist call was to bring a re-enchantment back to the world, especially within an urban environment where the palpable absence of nature was felt by early 20th century inhabitants. Extracting the magical attributes already imbued within a bustling metropolis and injecting this dynamism into the work of art was one of the grand ambitions of the expressionist philosophy. This was manifested by and large within an array of paintings which often portrayed perspectives from within the frantic, disjointed, disorienting metropolis of Berlin, emphasizing constant movement and the ever-changing ephemeral moment, experienced singularly within such a vivacious atmosphere. This vision of imperial Berlin is confirmed by Peter Fritzsche in his

“Vagabond in the Fugitive City: Hans Ostwald, Imperial Berlin and the Grosstadt-Dokumente.”¹¹⁰

Reassembling crowds in ever-changing urban tableaux, reconfiguring buildings and landmarks with each passing year, grafting on new additions of factories, tramcar lines and tenements, Imperial Berlin never acquired a distinctive or permanent physiognomy. It was primarily a work of improvisation. If Paris or even London was old and deep and layered, presenting a repose which provided the flaneur with an archaeology of memorabilia even in the wake of industrial reconstruction, Berlin was relentlessly new, superficial and thus persistently bewildering. (386)

This type of urban landscape conveyed an unpredictability as well as a lack of fixity, as if strange forms and figures could suddenly appear without warning from obscure corners, upsetting one’s basic spatial reasoning; although, according to Georg Simmel, the chaos and tumult of the metropolis actually resulted from “the calculating exactness of everyday life.”¹¹¹ This attempt to re-enchant and re-animate a kind of spatial spirituality on the part of urban expressionists sought to clarify and enhance certain aspects already present within metropolitan aesthetics even though this sort of nostalgic utopianism was often obsessed with the forms and phenomena of the natural world.

To describe expressionist utopianism simply as nostalgic would certainly be an unfair characterization, as notions of the natural world were also undergoing rapid change. New perceptions of the “laws of nature” also sprouted up within an art and architecture that emphasized the triumph of nature as an immanent principle. The paintings of artists such as Wenzel Hablik took the crystalline form as an architectural principle. “Crystalline castles nestled

¹¹⁰ Peter Fritzsche. “Vagabonds in the Fugitive City: Hans Ostwald, Imperial Berlin and the Grosstadt-Dokumente.” *Journal Of Contemporary History* 29.3 (1994): 385-402.

¹¹¹ Georg Simmel. *Metropolis and Mental Life*. The Blackwell City Reader. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson, eds.. Oxford and Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002.

in the mountains also appeared in the 1904 book *Arkitektur-Skizzen* by Hermann Billing, teacher of Hans Luckhardt and Max Taut (Bruno Taut's brother.) The crystal remained a popular metaphor for the unity of material nature and the immaterial spirit among expressionist artists and writers, partly as a result of the writings of the influential monist philosopher and Darwinian biologist Ernst Haeckel, whose *Kristallseelen* was published 1917."¹¹² Haeckel's major contribution to Darwinian biology was the theory of recapitulation, which was summed up in the maxim "Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," meaning that the ancestral characteristics of an organism would appear as distinct stages within fetal development. This biological notion of ancestral heritage entails the reemergence of genetic characteristics of predecessors that no longer truly belong to the organism in question; they are rather part of an archive of "species memory" that is accessed during the course of fetal development. However, the conclusions drawn from this by theorists of degeneration are that each individual is a carrier of the marks and traits of his forebears, both positive and negative.

As the expressionist impulse found its way into film, dark background, low lighting and undefined spatial contours became part and parcel of an uncanny cinema that conveyed an atmosphere saturated with the roguish, bestial temperament of a villain who straddled the fence between the human world and its irrational counterpart. The expressionist *mis en scene* conveyed an utter mysteriousness, if not otherworldliness, surrounding the motivations of so-called evil characters. In this regard, the kind of expressionist horror that arose mesmerized audiences by presenting a figure whose ambitions did not bend to any code of civility in bourgeois society, but were of a seemingly different order altogether, closer to the "base" drives of the natural world.

¹¹² Timothy O. Benson. "Fantasy and Functionality: The Fate of Utopia." Expressionist Utopias: Paradise, Metropolis, Architectural Fantasy. Ed. Timothy O. Benson. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994. p. 37

These characters demonstrated the survival of a genetic signature that could not yet be fully snuffed out by the march of modern progress, the last hold-out of extinct races preserving the lost mores and habits of a forgotten world. This horrific figure appears as something “not-yet-disenchanted” within the confines of a rationalist, enlightened society, while simultaneously often possessing superhuman characteristics.

In Fritz Lang’s *Das Testament Dr Mabuses*,¹¹³ we see the teaming up of criminal forces and the medical establishment in order to bring about a state of generalized anarchy and civilizational breakdown in late Weimar Berlin. As a follow-up to the first two Mabuse films, *Dr Mabuse: Der Spieler* and *The Inferno*, Fritz Lang intentionally provides indications that the Mabuse character and his ambitions for civilizational collapse reflect those of the Nazi regime, and the personality of Hitler. However, the way this is achieved filmicly is quite telling. The scene in Doctor Baum’s chambers, midway through the film, in which he examines the insane scribbblings of his catatonic patient, Mabuse, who once governed all the rackets and syndicates of Berlin in the early post-war period. These writings appear penned as if by a mixture between the unsteady hand of a child and an expressionist painter. This “will” of the interned criminal *Übermensch* is so powerful that as the doctor reads the document (which is actually an instruction manual for carrying out acts of industrial and financial terrorism) a ghastly, half-transparent gestalt of Mabuse appears in front of him, a grotesque figure with bulging eyes and an oddly shaped skull. This spectral Mabuse then merges with the body of the doctor, embodying him, if you will. This scene, along with two others toward the end of the film, show Dr. Mabuse

¹¹³ *Das Testament Dr Mabuses*. Dir. Fritz Lang. Nero-Film AG, 1933. Film.

really to be a kind of ghostly spirit which may enter and exit the bodies of individuals at will and compel them to commit and orchestrate criminal acts.

This entails that criminal motivations and deeply anti-social ambitions are situated in the figure of the neurologist. In this case, we find that within the very person who is granted the authority to distinguish the normal from the pathological in German society, lies the presence of sickness, insanity, irrationality, and a passionate hatred of that society. It is interesting in this case that the spirit of the criminal mastermind, or his *will*, so to speak, is then executed by the modern medical establishment, entailing that its power to diagnose and treat nervous conditions may also be the rationalized descendent of a folk mysticism. As we learn earlier in the film, Dr. Mabuse was committed to a mental institution after he supposedly saw the ghosts of his own victims in the midst of a showdown with the police. Mabuse fell into shock by the occurrence, in which it was assumed that the violence of the confrontation with the police caused him to leave his senses, a shock that was also responsible for Mabuse's quasi-catatonic state in the mental institution (although, in this state, he was somehow still capable of writing out commands and directives for his men to commit crimes.) What may have been previously thought to be the product of contact with the supernatural is here explained to be the result of exposure to shocks in the modern world. This is paralleled at the end of the film, after the car chase, where Doctor Baum himself becomes catatonic and enters Mabuse's recently vacated cell in his own mental institution, staring fixedly at the same emptiness that his patient once did. Here, Doctor Baum has undergone precisely what he diagnosed as shock for his patient, the witnessing of ghosts, but of course, the doctor is no longer "there" to diagnose himself.

The doctors's chambers also have decorations that, with the grim lighting used in the scene, seem to invoke voodoo and folk mysticism. These masks and figurines may, in the study of another scientist, appear to be the trophies of a cultural enthusiast interested in an exotic, primitive world that his or her scientific contributions have helped to discredit. But in this case, the very "science" practiced by the doctor (which also includes hypnosis, and other "questionable" medical techniques) seems here to be actively under the influence of the "black arts." There is also an assortment of skulls on the shelves which allude to the kind of human typology developed by 19th century German anthropologists with the help of craniology; however, in this *mis en scene*, the skulls also seem to be part of some magic ritual or incantation. The walls (like many of Lang's films, even during his career as a noir director) are also adorned with expressionist paintings, an addition that also makes a curious statement about expressionism's attempt at a "re-enchantment of the world," by transporting fantastic impressions and distillations of the sublime in the natural world into spaces of urban security and order. These paintings appear both to be a kind of folk art as well as expressionist works, which makes an interesting statement about the expressionist impulse. These signifiers come together to create a sense that the doctor is using his position, or *is being used*, to bring about a breakdown of a bourgeois world in which the supernatural has been supposedly banished.

The skulls in this scene do also suggest more by the fact that the specter of Mabuse has a ghastly visage with an extremely pointy nose and an oddly slender head. The connection between the unique skull specimens on the doctor's shelf and the face of Mabuse indicates that Mabuse's uniqueness and abilities may also have a racial and genetic corollary. In Andrew Zimmerman's *Anthropology and Antihumanism in Imperial Germany*, he devotes an entire chapter to the issue

of skull-measurement as a means of race-classification within German anthropology. “Anthropologists’ view of nature as timeless and of race as immutable allowed for a nonevolutionary physical anthropology that focused on physical traits as ethnological characteristics, characteristics that shed light on the relations among various populations in an area...Anthropologists understood the skull as an arbitrarily chosen body part that they used to characterize human races. They hoped that, by taking certain standardized measurements of skulls from a given population, they could mathematically calculate the typical skull form of that group.”¹¹⁴ The study of craniology had for the 19th century anthropologist much more significance than simple anatomical interest. Rather, it provided a means of definitively distinguishing different racial characteristics that could more or less be generalized across a population. The use of this skull trope in the film, however, suggests the return of some lost race whose status as human remains in question.

In this regard, *Mabuse* follows clearly in the lineage of expressionist horror villains, from the likes of *Nosferatu*¹¹⁵ and the “somnambulist” in *Caligari*.¹¹⁶ The bestial and phenotypical divergences from the norm are signifiers of a moral depravity that is so debased as to suggest that these figures may themselves not actually belong to the human species proper. In Stephen Kern’s

¹¹⁴ Andrew Zimmerman. *Anthropology and Antihumanism in Imperial Germany*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001. p.87

¹¹⁵ *Nosferatu*. Dir. F.W. Murnau. Jofa-Atelier Berlin-Johannisthal, 1929. Film

¹¹⁶ *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Dir. Robert Wiene. Decla-Bioscop AG, 1920. Film



Das Testament Dr Mabuses. Dir. Fritz Lang. Nero-Film AG, 1933. Film. retrieved from <http://4.bp.blogspot.com/_C_8M2WVWfgM/TRt81pTf9I/AAAAAAAAAISE/Qx_PskQJxI0/s400/01.jpg>

A Cultural History of Causality, he discusses how in the late 19th century criminality was often figured as a genetic defect, or as the result of a kind of hereditary “stain.” “With solid Darwinian influence, British psychiatry affirmed clear ties between heredity and crime. Darwin had applied his theory of atavism to warn that ‘some of the worst dispositions which occasionally...make their appearance in families, may perhaps be reversion to a savage state.’ In 1870 the Scottish prison surgeon J.B. Thomson argued that there is a distinct criminal class of ‘demi-civilized savages’ who are ‘born into crime.’ These hereditary criminals frequently inherit other disorders such as epilepsy and insanity and tend to be incurable.”¹¹⁷ Thus, the emergence of particular phenotypical traits suggests, in light of certain genetic views on anti-social behavior, the presence of some phylogenetic germ, not entirely superseded by more recent phases in human

¹¹⁷ Stephen Kern. *A Cultural History of Causality*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004. p.32

evolutionary development. This fantasy plays with the idea of a *biological uncanny* in which it is not simply an idea or a belief in “mana” that reemerges in an epoch in which such cosmologies have already been deposed; rather, the uncanny here is also a genetic entity whose reemergence has far-reaching social consequences. In a certain sense, this may really describe the peculiarity of the figure of the “great criminal” in the expressionist era: he is uncanny in both senses of dredging up an unenlightened cosmology to explain supernatural powers and phenomena, as well as being biologically “uncanny,” a freak of nature who has the misfortune of having to make a home out of modern world which is ill-suited to his nature. However, Mabuse is also clearly, and by the director’s admission, an embodiment of the Nietzschean idea of the Übermensch, and in this sense, it appears deliberate that the Übermensch should also have particular race characteristics (which in this case are portrayed as deformities and oddities.)



Das Testament Dr. Mabuses. Dir. Fritz Lang. Nero-Film AG, 1933. Film. retrieved from <http://www.filmsquish.com/guts/files/images/Testament_des_Dr_Mabuse_Das-6.jpg>

While there may be a genetic reference with the Mabuse character, it seems as though the infection by the “criminal germ” occurs supernaturally, free from biological contagion or inheritance, as a kind of magic. The mode of contagion here also occurs within a zone of undecidability, undecidable in the sense that it occurs in a manner that bends the laws of a scientific paradigm—particularly that of positivistic external causation and infection. It remains fundamentally undecidable as to whether these visions of a spectral Mabuse, who comes to embody Baum, are hallucinations originating from an imbalance within Baum’s psyche or are actually-existing phenomena which somehow infect the doctor. The doctor is also someone who can supposedly distinguish when individuals are faking their nervous illnesses (a skill he praises himself for in his university lecture while discussing the peculiar case of Mabuse.) Here, strangely enough, it becomes impossible to evaluate the legitimacy of the doctor’s supernatural experience because *he* would normally be the very authority who could determine this. *This dynamic suggests that although the rest of the world may be free of the supernatural as a result of medical science, it lives on within the authority of that very science.* In this regard the doctor is placed in a new position of authority in regard to the overall health of society, but is also in a much better position to take advantage of this. Is his illness, whose symptoms include embodiment by and visions of the supernatural, simply a cover for his criminal ambitions? The end of film leaves us at an impasse in which it is unclear whether Mabuse truly wields these mystical powers or not because the figure who can determine this is himself under their influence. (In chapter 5, I will also address a similar dynamic in the 1986 film *Nomads*¹¹⁸ in

¹¹⁸ *Nomads*. Dir. John McTiernan. Cinema VII, 1986. Film

which there is a particular kind of contagion whose symptoms are that one sees apparitions, a logic which culminates in the infected becoming himself an apparition.)

It is also interesting to note that the so-called “reign of crime” Mabuse plans to establish through strategic terrorist attacks on the infrastructure of civil society is a state of civilizational breakdown, plagued by disasters and chaos. Mabuse’s true objectives, as spoken through the mouthpiece of the doctor, have nothing to do with the criminal acquisition of large quantities of wealth for financial gain. Rather, Mabuse seems to revel in the chaos itself, as if the complete and utter destruction of civilizational norms and infrastructure has a value in and of itself. This type of valuation can be read in light of Georges Bataille’s theories of wealth expenditure and destruction as the defining economic practices of different cultures.¹¹⁹ But, it seems rather, that the aim of this arch-criminal is to indulge in his fascination with disaster and peril, and destroy a society which conceives of itself as based on financial gain, bringing out, rather, its obverse character as a social order based on the increase and valuation of destructive power. Mabuse’s criminal mind is praised as a beacon of redemption for the bourgeois world; although, it appears that redemption here is none other than absolute annihilation.

To fulfill his aims, Mabuse is also easily capable of recruiting a wide array of otherwise decent citizens to do his bidding because there is an economic crisis, and the employment offices of Berlin are chock-full of unlucky applicants trying their hand at receiving gainful employment. Mabuse’s syndicate attains its coherency and voluntarism by the failure of capitalism to provide work for all members of the population, as well as the failure of the welfare state to provide for the dispossessed and unfit in times of need. Although the chemical and industrial giants, whose

¹¹⁹ Georges Bataille. *The Accursed Share Vol. 1*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001.

facilities Mabuse's thugs destroy throughout the film, seem to hold onto their wealth and weather the financial storms, a dispossessed working class and unstable lumpenproletariat seem to be growing uncontrollably in the midst of economic breakdown. It is these individuals who have nothing to lose after exhausting all other options and who have lost all ties of loyalty to the government and the social system.

As Hannah Arendt notes in *Origins of Totalitarianism*,¹²⁰ one of the facets of late 19th century European imperialism is the combination of “superfluous wealth” with “superfluous labor,” both of which were then exported to colonize and establish rule in other lands. This helped to mitigate against the dangers of an unstable underclass and the mob organizations who lacked any conventional economic scruples and thus possessed minimal national or civic loyalty. The colonies provided a “safety valve” for the expenditure of both unproductive wealth and unproductive workers. German imperialism, however, never truly developed to this stage, and thus was forced to wrestle with the fallout of industrial gain without an external release. This, of course, entailed increasing attempts on the part of government bureaucrats and statesmen to comprehend why and how the workforce was becoming less “healthy” in certain respects, and shifted the discourse away from economic conditions over to questions of eugenics, and to a politicization of theories of degeneration and their attribution to different racial groups.

¹²⁰ Hannah Arendt. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt Inc., 1968.

Chapter 3: Urban Vitalism: The *Milieu Intérieur*, the Man-Machine and the Microbiology of Otherness

According to Jean T. Langford, in addition to various other anthropologists who have investigated the role of sorcery and the “witch-doctor” in primitive cultures, the efficacy of the cure or diagnosis put forth by the healer does not correspond entirely to its *truthfulness* when examined from the standpoint of any medical system, whether that be allopathy or the strictures of Ayurveda. In many instances, the curative powers of the healer are more likely to be found in his or her capacity to imbue basic medicinal materials and interpretations with an aura of medical or spiritual authority, an excessive symbolic content whose healing promise is attractive enough to enlist the belief of the patient.¹²¹ This suggests that at least part of what solicits the belief of the afflicted belongs to the realm of fantasy. By fantastical, I do not mean to say non-existent; however, it is important to recognize just how much notions of illness and the state of being “sick” are already supplemented by the active work of the imagination. While an individual may have symptoms of a terminal illness, part of what completes the *ontology* of the illness—if we acknowledge that a fuller understanding of any given malady must also take its social consequences into account—is the knowledge of what these symptoms ultimately point to. Hence, the old adage that a disease can only be as bad as its worst symptom. The gravity of an illness, both psychologically and socially, is intimately connected to the dangers of its worst manifestation, without which it would not be the same. Thus, part of what defines a disease in its social register (i.e. beyond its clinical definition) is an imaginative supplement whose inventory

¹²¹ Jean T. Langford. “Medical Mimesis: Healing Signs of a Cosmopolitan Quack.” *American Ethnologist*. 26. (1999): 24-46.

is informed by medical, as well as other kinds of, knowledge, a symbolic register that is activated or deactivated by the symbolic power imbued within doctors, as well as other kinds of healers.

What all of this points to is the insufficiency of the medical sciences in establishing complete dominion over the determination of the healthy and the sick, the normal and the pathological. While a doctor will often not hesitate to assume the guise of authority that is phylogenetically bequeathed to him or her as a healer, there are, of course, others who discover alternative means of performing a symbolic role of such social significance, at times with much more vibrance and commitment to the job, although they lack a medical degree and advertise their “expertise” in newspaper ads. In this regard, the symbolic space left open for the “healer,” which can also be occupied by entities other than charismatic or educated individuals, entities more conveniently described as *discourses* and *bureaucracies*, is an excessive space, whose richness refuses to be overdetermined by a singular paradigm. This symbolic space points to an essential relationship between belief and health, one whose anthropological history is extremely long and deep. Although, it seems that the western modality of “health belief” has gone to great pains to purge itself of the necessity of belief in the functioning of medical schemes. *Part of the allopathic belief system is that it does not require belief in order to function medically.*¹²²

Langford explores acts of mimesis within modern medicine and how they relate to an “excess of the signifier,” which, in her particular example, applies to a certain kind of Ayurvedic medicine practiced by a guru that most others in the profession consider to be a quack. Langford insists, however, that part of what grants the medicine its healing properties is the aura generated around it by the symbolic authority and charisma of the doctor/guru, whose practices are capable

¹²² Michael Taussig. *Mimesis and Alterity*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

of enlisting the belief of the patient. Because the material substance has come into contact with a wielder of “magic,” the substance itself may then actually function as a healing substance.

Dr. Mistry was fond of saying that he practiced “110 percent Ayurved.” Ultimately it is this extra ten percent, this excess of meaning “spilling over the referent” (Taussig 1993:233) that challenges scientific and social scientific rituals of signification. The two aspects of Dr. Mistry's practice that make him most susceptible to the charge of quackery are his recruitment of images from magical medicine and his commercialistic style. As Taussig has shown, both magic and the techniques of advertising make obvious the mimetic aspects of signification that are hidden in modern science. He argues that in the act of signification and representation, the sign or the image gains power over the referent or the object. This is, he points out, the elementary principle of sympathetic magic in which the copy gains power over the original in the very act of imitating it. The copy, because it can never be a perfect copy, is always sliding between the sensuousness of its contact with the original and the arbitrariness of its representation of it (Taussig 1993:17).¹²³

This power of the copy to borrow the sensuousness of the original and yet to remain sovereign from it in the very act of signification is crucial to understanding the power of the fetish, in that there is a slippage that occurs between the nature of the original and its simulation.¹²⁴ If belief is considered to be an essential part of the healing process, then it is possible that in some cases, placebos “imbued” with healing power could be more effective than their medicinal equivalents. In this case the production of the medical fetish does not strictly require hard science behind it in order to function as a healing implement; it needs, though, to appear with the sufficient stamp of symbolic authority in order to garner the belief of the patient. In many cases, Langford shows, it

¹²³ Jean T. Langford. Medical Mimesis: Healing Signs of a Cosmopolitan Quack. *American Ethnologist*. 26. (1999): 24-46.

¹²⁴ See Jean Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulations*. Selected Writings, ed. Mark Poster. Stanford University Press, 1998, pp.166-184.

may be enough to produce significations of healing in order to initiate, if not carry out, the actual process.

However, as Langford demonstrates using Taussig's framework, the instruments and accoutrements of the sciences will purposefully avoid the use of excessive advertising and other types of fetishes normally associated with the alternative healing arts. But this objectivism which underlies the authority that science has in making truth claims is also precisely the mode through which its fetishistic, ideological content is conveyed.

We are bombarded, to be sure, by the eerie icons of stethoscopes and anatomical diagrams and plastic intravenous tubes. These are objects, however, that are typically supposed by practitioner and patient alike to be entirely functional and without fetishistic glow. That is to say, they are supposed to serve and correspond to the body's dynamics. Pharmaceutical salesmen do advertise, of course, perched on chairs in doctors' offices, flicking through their glossy full-color schematics of the effects of drugs on the body, a blur of curving arrows, cross-sectioned kidneys, and block-print letter claims...Practitioners who advertise more extravagantly are suspected of being quacks. The signs of science are considered by scientists and others to have a special objective relationship with natural objects. When these signs are recruited for advertising images, they risk seeming like simulacra, manipulated solely for the purpose of making money.¹²⁵

In this regard, it appears that the fetish quality of professional medicine is hidden precisely within the semiotics of objectivity. By supposedly not exaggerating or distorting, these tools are supposed to measure quite particular phenomena, but as diagnostic tools, stethoscopes and microscopes do not promise a cure. Rather, they produce an image of authority that does not borrow the tropes of a history of mystical healing and instead, portray themselves as non-partisan, non-human observers whose readings cannot be tainted with human error—in other

¹²⁵ Jean T. Langford. "Medical Mimesis: Healing Signs of a Cosmopolitan Quack." *American Ethnologist*. 26. (1999): p.37

words, as infallible mechanisms which are only attuned to the phenomena they are constructed to register. However, Langford also mentions that pharmaceutical companies do advertise using fantastical portraits of the internal behavior of the human body, such as how a painkiller will suddenly produce a wave of “blue” calm over a “red” inflamed region of the digestive tract, for example. The allopathic business is conveniently separated into two branches, one being the scientific-diagnostic and two, the healing-ameliorative, suggesting that the one side is not contaminated by the need to advertise and sell medications, but may rather remain neutral in observing the disorder. At this stage, once diagnosis is confirmed, the same internal diagrams of the structure and function of different organs can be seen in advertisements for medicines whose effects are painted in compelling, imaginary patterns.

For my purposes here, I will examine how figurations of the internal environment within human beings, constructed on the one side by state-sanctioned allopathic sources, and on the other, by alternative or holistic approaches to the body and its health, also have a fetishistic dimension that may have repercussions far beyond the scientific or philosophic realm of application for which they were developed. This chapter will demonstrate how different fetishes of the internal environment have been entangled with scientific racism, race-thinking and the relationship between climate and health, particularly in the Southern California area. By investigating the philosophical underpinnings of different approaches toward the functioning of the human body, I hope to demonstrate how approaches to health may also have real material consequences in divergent domains, particular in urban development, real-estate sales, and racial segregation. The attempt by different factions to push their theories of the human body into hegemonic positions, and to be supported or not by the dominant paradigm in the process, also

shaped how a major metropolis was to be able to emerge out of an arid, rustic desert, while also determining its demographic constitution in the process. While images of the internal processes of the human body, by all means, were not unique to the late nineteenth century, and competing versions of biological interiority have been in circulation for centuries (whether humoral, *elan vital*, etc.), the pictures that availed themselves at this time emerged after the rise of bacteriology, and so therefore, tended either to integrate its precepts or to react against it. The difference now was that figurations of the internal environment carried a different stamp of scientific authority if they functioned in accordance with bacteriology, a scientific paradigm that was often invoked in sanctioning pseudo-scientific theories in the interest of powerful political and economic factions.



The Construction of the Internal Environment

Alfred Döblin was not the only expressionist doctor in Berlin in the early 20th century who spent most of his days in various medical clinics. Gottfried Benn, the expressionist poet, whose work is famous for its often grisly and gory details of human abjection on the operating table and in the streets, was also a dermatologist and specialist in venereal diseases. This visceral (literally) component in his poetry from the eyes of a physician brought an apocalyptic dimension to the expressionist re-enchantment of urban life in Berlin, emerging out of the tradition of Baudelaire whose “flowers of evil”¹²⁶ were the expressions of a new, tainted, yet beautiful, urban vitality. While his poems emphasized a startling look at death with an eye for the details of the flesh, these depictions underscored a clear lack of interest in its spiritual or soulful

¹²⁶ Charles Baudelaire. *The Flowers of Evil*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

dimensions, focusing instead on the phenomenology of death and illness from a hospitable gaze.¹²⁷ However, in other writings from his perspective as a doctor, his approach to illness and the nature of the human body was much less positivistic and rather emphasized another dimension to healing and medicine that would be more accurately described as faith-healing.

In his *Irrationalism and Modern Medicine*,¹²⁸ Benn gives an account of treatments for skin warts that range from the entirely medicinal, to the partly medicinal and partly suggestive, all the way to the entirely suggestive. The modes of treatment which have a suggestive character appear, from his personal experience as a physician (or from that of his fictional counterpart Rönne), to be just as effective as the others.

He injects some purified water through a needle under the skin, wherever he likes but usually in the upper arm, casually remarking: 'during the injection you'll feel a mild burning in the warts; it'll soon go, but expect it to return a couple of times until the warts fall off.' And in due course, the mild burning settles and the warts fall off. Appeal to them, and warts fall off, thinks Rönne; in other words, warts, pathologically well-demarcated structures, examined hundreds of times under the microscope, vanish by persuasion. Small tumours caused by viruses dry up through the force of the word. Quite obviously human beings are something completely different, quite incomprehensibly different, from what my science taught me; nothing so reducible, nothing so viscous, nothing whose cadaver has to be worked on with gas pipes and rubber drains in order to cure and spy on its being. (203)

This description of a suggestive remedy for warts requires that the patient be deceived by the doctor, who, instead of giving him a chemical solution which catalyzes a process of healing in the body, sanitizing the skin of parasites, the doctor catalyzes a process of healing by engaging

¹²⁷ In his poem "Appendectomy" a vitalist vibrance is to be found in the clinical materialism of the hospital: Everything white and sterile and gleaming./Under a sheet a moan and a stir./Abdomen painted. Scalpels are gleaming./"We are ready when you are, Sir."/The first incision. Like cutting of bread./"Clips!" A gusher of crimson red./Deeper. The muscles flaming and fresh,/A garland of roses the vibrant flesh.

¹²⁸ *The Body in the Library*. Ed. Iain Bamforth. London and New York: Verso, 2003

the belief of the patient. In other words, the physical body of the patient, as Benn claims, is not merely a bunch of components surrounded by viscous fluids that can be manipulated with chemicals; the physical body is also an “informational” entity which is constantly sending and receiving signals to make and remake its boundaries against the external world, and to remove contaminants which threaten to make the organism more and more like its environment.

Benn goes on to explain that positivistic science alone cannot account for the full nature of the body. “...if people paint the sign of the dove on warts in Japan because the word ‘mame’ means pea as well as wart and doves eat peas: and the warts vanish, then here the word becomes flesh, blood becomes water, and we are only a step away from going over to the contents of the coffin, and saying: Arise and go forth...The body is obviously something fugitive, not the chemical-physic morass of the 19th century with positivism pressed in its face: it is nothing but an inner principle, and when it is touched, everything moves. Provided the right man touches it with the right word: this is the basic requirement.” (206) Benn’s examination of the folk cure brings him to a curious statement, especially from the mouth of a physician, that “the word becomes flesh.” Here, the content of language is not descriptive or representational, it is informational, not as expository, but as *code*. The word, if correct, spoken by the one with the correct symbolic stature or healing power, may “reprogram” the body to negotiate its illnesses differently. This idea brings up the insight that what we consider to be the physical body and the internal environment of the organism is partly an informational construct, in which translation, transcription, communication and signals all play a role that at times may supersede the automatic phenomena of chemical processes. The allopathic mode of healing focuses on the body as a collection of automatisms and chemical reactions which are considered to be

autonomous from the “will” or “soul” of the individual. Other modes of healing claim that the will is always involved in healing, and part of the job of the healer is to influence the will to do things that it may not want or know how to do.

On the whole this enters into larger philosophical debates concerning the nature of the will and the soul, but it also evokes another field concerning the occult and superstition in which individuals could be possessed by spirits or other forces of nature (a subject also examined in various expressionist films like *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*,¹²⁹ *Dr. Mabuse*,¹³⁰ and *Der Golem*),¹³¹ and in such states could commit crimes or do things entirely out of character. It has been shown that so-called primitive societies who exhibit a strong belief in animism would practice forms of magical mimicry of nature, allowing these spirits of the natural world to possess the shaman or seer, in an incantation or magical act to help influence the natural course of events in the tribe’s favor.¹³² In such cases, it appears that mimicry of the spirit addressed is also the means by which possession may take place, suggesting that embodiment and actual *becoming* proceed from an initial attempt to resemble or to mimic. In such a ceremony, simulation precedes becoming (if “real” becoming ever actually occurs at all), and also means that *fraudulence* is part of the “real” magical act. This faculty of fraudulent mimicry and suggestive magic, which seems to be found consistently throughout the human species in most, if not all, cultures, regardless of their degree of technological development, of course, appears

¹²⁹ *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Dir. Robert Wiene. Decla-Bioscop AG, 1920. Film

¹³⁰ *Das Testament Dr Mabuses*. Dir. Fritz Lang. Nero-Film AG, 1933. Film.

¹³¹ *Der Golem*. Dir. Paul Wegener. Projektions-AG Union, 1920. Film

¹³² For more on totemism and sympathetic magic, see Sigmund Freud. *Totem and Taboo*. London: Routledge, 1919; Emile Durkheim. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. London: Ruskin House, 1976.

differently against the backdrop of rationalized, modern scientific culture. Whereas in other cultures, it is not interrogated as anything out of the ordinary, for Western Europe and the United States, such shamanistic power was clearly a medical anomaly, which at times threatened the stature of scientific precepts. But it remains scientifically unclear what this matrix of suggestion, psychogenesis and imagination actually is, and how it may be influenced or manipulated in order to structure and repair the physical human body.

The notion of the *milieu intérieur* was developed by Claude Bernard¹³³ as a concept which understood the different fluids, substrates, or the “extra-cellular fluid environment,” of the human body as an internal *terrain*, a “soil” upon which particular agents of infection might thrive or perish. Although the term was originally coined by Charles Robin as a shorthand for updating the notion of Hippocratic humors and was more or less ignored throughout the 19th century, it became useful again at the beginning of the 20th century as a way of determining the best conditions for the inside of the body in avoiding the dangers of proliferating disease germs. The concept of the internal environment is based in an evolutionary approach to human physiology, which makes the argument that “higher” more complex organisms have succeeded in separating themselves more thoroughly from the environments in which they subsist, and that complex neural networks required such separation in order to evolve in the first place. In this sense, a tacit gradation was developed which hierarchically evaluated how “advanced” various species were according to their ability to keep their internal environments, through homeostatic and immunological regulation, distinct from their surroundings. For example, certain species of

¹³³ Charles G. Gross. “Claude bernard and the Constancy of the Internal Environment.” The Neuroscientist. Volume 4, Number 5, 1998

marine life that contain a large amount of salt-water proportionate to their own sizes would not occupy very high positions in such a schematic.

While terrain theory offered a counterpoint to the germ theory of disease by insinuating that agents of disease can only be so powerful as an organism's internal environment allows them to be,¹³⁴ it also provides the conceptual basis for an interesting set of other branches of the human sciences, most notably, cybernetics. While popularized notions of cybernetics tend to focus on robotics, artificial intelligence and computer systems engineering, the early stages of the discipline centered more on an interrogation of the "government" or "steering" of an organismal or "machinic" complex of factors and how it establishes a feedback relationship with its environment.¹³⁵ Homeostatic theory, which was developed in the 20th century as a continuation of Bernard's theories, emphasized regulation of the temperature of extra-cellular fluids, most particularly the blood, even in extreme conditions unfavorable to this kind of constant regulation. Such a complex sensitivity to environmental triggers in the protection of an internal environment is the subject matter of homeostasis. Whatever the nature is of such an entity which stands behind the steering of a such mass of factors, whether a "vitalistic soul" that is not subject to the same laws as other kinds of mechanistic entities, or a kind of emergent order visible in complex dynamical systems (whether or not they are alive), it appears that such a notion of the internal environment also inadvertently contributed to the basis for certain types of scientific racism and theories of racial degeneration. According to such views, the "lower" races

¹³⁴ It is even confirmed by multiple sources that, on his death bed, Pasteur said, "Bernard was correct. I was wrong. The microbe (germ) is nothing. The terrain (milieu) is everything."

¹³⁵ For a more sustained discussion of the development of the field of cybernetics and to its literary instantiations, see N. Katherine Hayles. *How we Became Posthuman*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

were considered less advanced because they were thought to be less capable of distinguishing themselves from the environments in which they lived, and hence, it was thought that the symptoms of “racial degeneration” could also appear as nervous ailments which indicated the failure of the individual to properly distinguish him or herself in a context of action—a state of being which manifested itself through the development of automatism, mimicking behaviors and other types behavior which suggest glitches in complex nervous function, the prized child of a “highly evolved” internal environment.

These kinds of “glitches” within nervous function also raised various questions within debates around mechanism and vitalism in the context of the 20th century metropolis. As shown earlier, Benjamin’s essay¹³⁶ on urban crowds and memory also possesses an important section on the demands of the labor process within industrial conditions upon the body of the laborer. This industrial process is characterized by breaks and cuts, in which fluid motion is interrupted on a constant basis and the same tasks must be sequentially repeated a dizzying amount of times. Such an environment calls for a different discipline within the human organism which can react appropriately to these conditions, a discipline which calls forth the fabled figure of mechanistic science—the automaton. This entity (as we saw as the “Man-Machine” in Lang’s *Metropolis*),¹³⁷ while often invented for the purposes of production, also tends, in the literary sphere, to become the agent of destructive capacities latent within the mode of production. But while the automaton may be suited perfectly for the demands of the production, in social life it appears as the epitome of stupidity, whose “malfunctions” and repetitive ticks represent a failure in cognitive ability and complexity to respond appropriately to the social environment—a failure which appears

¹³⁶ Walter Benjamin. *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 1989.

¹³⁷ *Metropolis*. Dir. Fritz Lang. Ufa, 1927. Film.

strikingly similar to the some of the symptoms found in patients with nervous ailments. What this suggests is that the people who might be the most adapted to the production-process are the least adapted to the society it sustains.

I must also briefly mention point out that we partly owe Freud's theory of the *Unheimlich*¹³⁸ to a story whose femme fatale is actually an automaton, E.T.A. Hoffmann's early 19th century horror short story *Der Sandmann*.¹³⁹ Without spending too much time on this story, it suffices to say that the main character's visions (which remain undecidable throughout the story as either originating from Nathanael's, the main character's, psychological problems or rather as representing some hidden horrific truth) that revolve around the diabolical figure Koppelius and his later incarnations as Coppela are based in a tension between a mythic world beneath bourgeois society and rationalized science. Nathaniel's visions initially occur when he witnesses a traumatic accident in which his father dies in a dangerous alchemical experiment, and later recur when he falls in love with the hyperreal automaton Olimpia. When he learns that she is an automaton, this blurring of the mechanization and the primitive produces an otherworldly sensation, in which magic erupts once again into a rational world, yet also always granting the possibility that these delusions are simply products of Nathaniel's disturbed mind.¹⁴⁰ This is also a dialectic in which the novel appearance of the socially functioning automaton, who

¹³⁸ Sigmund Freud. *The Uncanny*. London: Penguin, 2003.

¹³⁹ E.T.A. Hoffmann. *Der Sandmann*. Stuttgart: Phillip Reclam jun. GmbH & Co., 1991.

¹⁴⁰ A similar notion is recapitulated in Doctor Faustus in that the process by which the vital energies of a people are harnessed into an aesthetic form is by the work of mathematical abstraction and mechanism. By the use of pastiche the elements of folk culture may be mimicked by the composer as mathematical entities, and then rebroadcast as finished works whose vitality is almost hyperreal. However, it is stated also in this story that the composing agency who generates the spontaneity within the composition, granting it its *Lebendigkeit*, is actually the most artificial property of the piece, which merely generates counterfeit mathematical replicas of cultural form.

was made by the hand of Coppola, a scientist who bears striking resemblance to Koppelius the threatening alchemist, produces a horror in Nathaniel (after learning that Olimpia is a machine) that is akin to seeing a ghost or an animistic spirit. The horror of the automaton is here expressed as a prehistoric horror in the face of the magical dimensions of the natural world.

With the arrival of the figure of Coppola in Nathanael's later years, however, we see that it is no longer the reemergence of alchemy (a mythic science) which revives "mythic dangers" from the dustbin of history. Rather, it is the devices of mechanistic science that transform the world into something mythical. It is not until Nathanael, who, by this point in his psychological recovery, treats Coppola simply as an Italian peddler of barometers and optic glasses, purchases and looks through one of these telescopes, that he is able to fall in love with the automaton Olimpia. This wonder of techno-science, which collapses physical distance for greater visual accuracy, actually enables Nathaniel to see Olimpia as a divine beauty. What this indicates is that an irrational content, supposedly banished by science from bourgeois life, is actually present within the scientific apparatus itself. In contrast to Taussig's description¹⁴¹ of the technology of medicine and science presenting itself as a simple conveyor of objectivity without any fetishistic distortion, here the spyglass which would simply provide an exact facsimile of objective reality actually conjures up a vitalistic essence to Olimpia that is likely to be chimerical. The transition of the figure Koppelius from a lawyer, to the sandman, to an alchemist, to an optician indicates the further integration of an irrational element into the very structure of the rationalized world. This same tendency can be noted in the "fantastic presence" of "Olimpia" within the mechanized automaton. "Unwillkürlich sah er hinein in Spalanzanis Zimmer; Olimpia sass, wie gewöhnlich,

¹⁴¹ Michael Taussig. *Mimesis and Alterity*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

vor dem kleinen Tisch, die Hände gefaltet.- Nun erschaute Nathanael erst Olimpias wunderschön Gesicht. Nur die Augen schienen ihm gar seltsam starr und tot. Doch wie er immer schärfer und schärfer durch das Glas hinschaute, war es, als gingen in Olimpias Augen feuchte Mondesstrahlen auf. Es schien, als wenn nun erst die Sehkraft entzündet würde; immer lebendiger und lebendiger flammten die Blicke.”¹⁴² (Hoffmann 28) Here, it becomes clear that this special viewing of the automaton through a glass, which was “gar nichts Besonderes,” not endowed with any spectral qualities, actually brought life into the eyes of Olimpia, which seemed otherwise dead. Instead of the dead returning to life (as in myth) to haunt the living, as a *Gespent* or revenant, we have the lifeless mechanical being taken for a self-conscious individual, with the aid of certain technologies of vision.

But if we are to examine such behavior, that found in nervous ticks, as well as in the blunderings of inferior robots, there is a kind of mimesis at work in which features of the external environment and other actors within it are mirrored by the entity in question. In other words, mimesis and nervous automatism are a result of a breakdown in the internal environment, which ceases to appropriately distinguish itself from its surroundings. This is also why Adorno and Horkheimer¹⁴³ address the modern taboo against mimetic behavior, whose magical modes appear to be as old as the human species itself. Mimesis is the resurgence of a so-called primitive modality in which the individual is involved in a kind of play and patterning with his or her environment, and allowing his or her behavior to fall with reckless abandon into automatisms and the momentary adoption of environmental features. This mimesis, when at its most extreme,

¹⁴² E.T.A. Hoffmann. *Der Sandmann*. Stuttgart: Phillip Reclam jun. GmbH & Co., 1991.

¹⁴³ Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1997.

is also what has come to be known in anthropological circles as sympathetic magic, practiced by shamans and other types of community healers across multiple civilizations across the globe for thousands and thousands of years. So, what happens when individuals become less distinguishable from their environment? It appears that they either become degenerates or magicians.

At the turn of the 20th century, the scientific disease picture of the individual body became a much more contested terrain, and a new kind of importance was granted to the way in which its function and immunological responses were imagined, represented and constructed by medical technicians, as well as those who worked to popularize them for the lay majority. One such popular writer, who worked to convey a revolutionary approach towards diet, was none other than Upton Sinclair, whose fame is usually associated with his exposure of the horrible working conditions in the meat-packing industry in *The Jungle*,¹⁴⁴ or with his utopian socialist politics in Southern California and his loss of the gubernatorial race. In the book, *Good Health and How We Won It*,¹⁴⁵ co-written with Michael Williams, Sinclair discusses a new approach toward dietary habits that claimed to strengthen the immune system, as well as the individual's overall strength and endurance. At the outset of the book, the authors go to great lengths to explain how this dietary practice was based in irrefutable medical facts, tested by prominent scientists at Yale. Early on in the book, the authors draw attention to two images which appear prior to the book's introduction that are photographs of human blood through a microscope, in which the white blood cells, Leukocytes, are seen to be in "battle" with invading disease germs

¹⁴⁴ Upton Sinclair. *The Jungle*. New York: Doubleday, 1906.

¹⁴⁵ Upton Sinclair and Michael Williams. *Good Health and How We Won It*. New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1909.

(influenza and plague). The white blood cells are described by the authors as independent organisms within the human body that fight off and absorb pathogenic germs whose life-cycles may poison the human body. Through this microbiological vantage point, the authors demonstrate that the human body is comprised of millions of smaller organisms, which are either beneficial, detrimental, or irrelevant to the health and survival of the human individual, entailing that the human is part of a microbiological world that goes on both inside and outside of him. In this case, the molar entity of the human is shown to be absolutely vulnerable to the microscopic if it does not have the appropriate health to fight off invading germs.

The overall gist of their treatise was the technique of Fletcherism, to chew one's food completely before swallowing, a technique which would maximize the food's output and minimize exhaustion of the body's digestive system. Once one did this, one would supposedly never need to eat more than his or her body actually required, suggesting that within the organism with all its automatic, unconscious processes, there lied an intelligent entity buried beneath humoral layers and matrices of structure and function, that would tell the individual to stop eating. Thus, this particular dietary strategy aimed at slowing the intake of food matter in order to allow the inner intelligence of the body to make itself heard to the individual. Already within this philosophy, there is a strange reversal between the so-called automatic processes of the body and the realm of will in which informed decisions are undertaken. Here, the inner voice of physical body will "decide" when enough is enough, and the conscious individual who willfully consumes food now appears as a mere Pavlovian automaton who gives in and gorges himself at the slightest stomach pang. Although this dietary technique appears to be liberating, as

one would not only increase his or her physical health but also find an “inner voice,” it was not entirely effective for Sinclair.

Over the next two years, Upton Sinclair continued his research into and experiments with dietetics, which he performed with the hope of securing the maximum amount of energy for his intellectual labors. This pursuit brought him to a completely different technique that he immediately adopted, and then quickly wrote another book about. In *The Fasting Cure*,¹⁴⁶ he extolls the healing powers of the extended fast, and how it liberates vital energies, normally ensnared within the Sisyphean work of peristalsis and digestion, for the overall care of the organism, strengthening the power of immune response and allowing the body to counteract the entrenchment of chronic illness. At the outset of this book, Sinclair also stated that he, by-and-large, had renounced some of the conclusions of his previous work with Williams, and that though he was convinced by dietetics in theory, when observing his own condition, he found that some of his health problems had only worsened, and that his hunger did not magically cease when his body had received the nutrients it needed. While both books fundamentally rely on the logic of the conservation of energy—which means primarily that energy “liberated” from unnecessary or excessive digestion can be used in the “revitalization” of the body—the underlying operating metaphors of the body’s internal, vital modalities showed some marked changes.

At the most basic level, this change can be registered in the shift away from looking at the body as an extra-cellular fluid terrain, or some kind of humoral soup, to seeing it more as an energy efficient machine that periodically needs to be reset by suspending the injection of fuel

¹⁴⁶ Upton Sinclair. *The Fasting Cure*. London: William Heinemann, 1911.

into it, a machine that was also intelligent. The notion of conservation of energy stems from physics, especially Helmholtz's 1st law of thermodynamics,¹⁴⁷ in which energy can never be created or destroyed, but can only change shape and form. The vital machine of the human body needs fuel to function, but too much of this will clog the system, eventually undermining its function. In Sinclair's words: "I regard the fast as Nature's own remedy for all other diseases. It is the only remedy which is based upon an understanding of the fundamental nature of disease. And I believe that when the glad tidings of its miracles have reached the people it will lead to the throwing of 90 per cent of our present *materia medica* into the waste-basket."¹⁴⁸ While he does not explicitly elaborate on what he means by the "fundamental nature of disease," it appears as though his theory of health is one in which the internal environment must periodically be given its own autonomy to cleanse itself—or to become *more internal*—and if this is regularly performed, disease will cease, or at least decrease significantly. Thus, while the fasting book does not reject the tenants of bacteriological pathology, it does, however, suggest that the true causes of infection lie within imbalances in the internal environment. Only in this case, we are not given a humoral image to work with, in which various interacting layers of "slime" sheath and nourish the vitality of the individual; rather, the image we get is cleaner, in which the internal organs go into a mode of detox and increase the body's purity. It is this notion of purity which really seems to define the shift in conceiving of the internal environment: after fasting the body somehow returns to its natural, pure state, and disease symptoms, depending on their severity, quickly begin to recede. What this entails is that the body is considered to be healthier the more

¹⁴⁷ See Anson Rabinbach. *The Human Motor*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

¹⁴⁸ Upton Sinclair and Michael Williams. *Good Health and How We Won It*. New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1909.

autonomous it is from its surroundings, which of course includes food consumption. The less bogged down the body is, the more its *innate* energies will emerge, clean energies that are free of illness. The emergence of these innate energies will also allow Sinclair's sought-after innate intelligence to emerge, as he demonstrates in cases where overweight people lose weight after a fast, and underweight people gain weight. It is as if without troublesome nuisance of external nutrients, the body can finally decide what it wants to be.

While this analysis is in no way an evaluation or judgement of the efficacy of such a technique, it is essentially an examination of the ideological content laden within such approaches to health. What is interesting about such an image of clean energy radiating from a body which has shed its impurities is that this energy is also essentially what the captains of industry want to have at their disposal to build empires of production. "Many of the people who wrote to me were victims of our system of wage slavery, who wrote me that they were ill, but could not get even a few days' release in which to fast. They wanted to know if they could fast and at the same time continue their work. Many can do this, especially if the work is of a clerical or routine sort. On my first fast I could not have done any work, because I was too weak. But on my second fast I could have done anything except very severe physical labour." (80) This passage is ironic in that one, the system of wage-slavery does not allow the worker the necessary time to purify himself, which would technically improve the quality of his energy-output in the production process. In many ways, even though Sinclair was a socialist through and through who railed against the system of capitalist exploitation in multiple volumes, his views concerning health and energy-maximization were quite similar to those attitudes of the class of people who

exploit labor-power. The picture of pure vital energies coursing through the laboring body, unencumbered by toxins and disease, was the same ideal sought after by the capitalist.

Late 19th century approaches to calculating the value of human energy (including those of Karl Marx) used equations which measured this energy both when it was inside the body and when it had become detached from that body, either in an object or in a process, a fact which led to the conclusion that this energy was *fundamentally the same*, although it could be expressed differently depending on where it was located. From this theoretical standpoint, the vital energy used in the labor process, for example on the factory floor, became mechanical when used in consort with machines. Notions of mechanical energy at this time, conceived also through the laws of thermo-dynamics, could also include human energy as part of this mechanical energy, maybe as an appendage, but yet as fundamentally made up of the same substance. Thus, the perspectives and organizational models which dealt with economic production on a grand scale and the orchestration of human labor at the macro-level, including the field of insurance developed as an extension of the welfare state (addressed more specifically in the last chapter), saw the internal environments of individuals as sources of energy in the production of industrial goods, rather than as sites of potential infection and threat—in other words, as furnaces capable of supplying clean energy to the demands of production. In a nutshell, these two competing views of the internal environment, while not necessarily scientifically at odds, led to sociological conclusions that were contradictory: namely, that the internal environment of the laborer is an essential source of energy for capitalist production, but that this same internal environment is also the source of microbiological dangers that could cripple the population with diseases their

immune systems are not prepared for—one of pitfalls of living with the “microbiology of otherness.”

Anson Rabinbach discusses how the emergence the concept of “Kraft”¹⁴⁹ displaced other forms of positivistic materialism. “The new scientific materialism was predicated on a single, indestructible and invisible *Kraft*, which could be perceived only in terms of its effects—in the material form of different kinds of mechanical work. Although energy was the source of all motion and matter, the materiality of the physical universe—energy—was nowhere to be encountered except in the manifest consequences of its enormous labor power. Materialism became, in a word, transcendental.” (48-49) This kind of abstract materialism, also clearly found within Marx and his notion of labor power, provides an alternative materialist approach to the physical world. At this time the laws of thermodynamics, energy circulation and the integration of human labor and mechanical work in industrial production became root metaphors for late-industrial society, which worked ideologically to envision industrial products as containers of energy trapped in a certain state. What this suggests is that the great industrial visionaries of the time were thinking broadly in terms of energy circulation as a means maximizing production, a refinement of their operation which found its focus in the body and health of the laborer.

The move away from a humoral aesthetic of human interiority, while bad for the business of medicine as Sinclair noted, was right in line with the purist strain of the urban vitalists. While this camp in no way rejected the notions of bacterial infection and the social nature of epidemics, such an approach to health also seemed to suggest that getting sick was a result of one’s chronic habits, regardless of whatever contagions might be floating around in the city. This

¹⁴⁹ Anson Rabinbach. *The Human Motor*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

individualization of health shifts the focus from sanitization and the social body onto the individual's own decisions to purify his or her body, an ideology which functions in urban environments to stigmatize the poorer sectors of the population, whose sicknesses are thought to be the simple result of bad dietary habits and hygiene without taking any infrastructural and social conditions into account. As Stallybrass and White argue in their *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*,¹⁵⁰ the “nomadic” class of people, which characterizes both the lumpenproletariat and the abject poor, were considered to be carriers of filth and disease in the big industrial city. “As the nomads transgress all settled boundaries of ‘home’, they simultaneously map out the area which lies beyond cleanliness.” (129) In this sense, the distribution of bodies plagued by sickness, or bogged down by toxic humors that resulted from bad habits, also had a topography that was characterized as filthy and “slimy.” Even though Stallybrass and White draw a clear line which tracks the travel of sewage from the suburbs into the slums, this reaction against mucus, slime and filth became allied with different modes of racism, as these substances, figured as emissaries of illness and social dangers, were thought to originate from the bodies of the “wrong kind” of people. In this sense, the figural representations of the internal workings of the human body, as well as operating metaphors for such processes, became a kind of political terrain connected to exclusion and segregation.

As we begin to move our examination into Southern California, it appears that the “campaign” against “mucus” from the radical fringe of health movements also had multiple registers in that, on the one hand, it evoked a physiology of different energy maximization and could rethink the sustenance needs of the individual, while on the other, it also correlated with

¹⁵⁰ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1986.

similar attitudes toward climate and urban space. The dry desert climate of Los Angeles was glorified with a particular allure also because it was thought to bring relief to many ailments, and in this same regard, the power of the dry desert climate also suggested a microbiological environment that was less “moist” and “sticky,” lacking the right substratum for the proliferation of certain debilitating bacteria. Images of the “moist” and the “slimy” were rather more suitable for the crowded cities of Europe and the East Coast, but did not seem to exist in Southern California, except when they were projected onto immigrant communities and certain regions of the city that were zoned into dilapidation, an aspect of uneven development that we will address later on.

This attack on mucus can be registered quite clearly in debates surrounding Arnold Ehret’s postulation of the internal environment as a “steam-gas engine,”¹⁵¹ whose successful operation depends upon the reduction of “mucus-producing” foods in the diet. Ehret, one of the founders of the raw-food, vegan movement, was of German descent and also spent some time in a vegetarian commune on the outskirts of Berlin during an earlier chapter in his lifelong health crusade. After developing the tenets of his radical food philosophy in Ascona, Switzerland, a location frequented by many famous authors including Hermann Hesse, Ehret emigrated to the United States to spread his doctrine, eventually opening up a sanitarium in the middle of Downtown Los Angeles with the help of his friend Benedict Lust, who also published some of his writings. When Ehret expounded upon the dangers of mucus and what it meant to cleanse oneself from them, it is telling that his metaphor of choice was that of an urban environment.

All disease is finally nothing else but a clogging up of the smallest blood vessels, the capillaries, by mucus. Nobody will want to clean the water-conduit of a city, a pipe-system, which is fed with

¹⁵¹ Arnold Ehret. *The Internal Uncleanliness of Man*. Beaumont: Lust, 1922.

soiled water by a pump, the filters of which are clogged up, without having the water-supply shut off during the cleaning process. If the conduit supplies the entire city or a portion of it with unclean water, or if even the smallest branch-pipes are clogged up, there is no man in the world who would repair or improve that respective spot; everybody thinks at once of the central, of the tank and the filters, and these together with the pumping machine can be cleaned only as long as the water supply is shut off.¹⁵² (8)

This comparison of the mucus within the blood-flow of an individual with sewage in the flow of water in a city suggests a curious aspect to Ehret's thought, which somehow generalizes mucus build-up at both the individual and social levels to be of the same nature. While Ehret also suggests that fasting allows the respite of the internal organs from excessive digestion, his real emphasis is on the reduction of mucus-like substances within the body's humoral constitution, in other words, a minimization of the body's humoral component. It seems he wanted to get rid of humors in theory and in practice.

Ehret's use of the metaphor of a "steam-gas engine" is also representative of a particular age in industrial development in which steam-power loomed quite large in the cultural imaginary, but even more importantly it functioned to replace root metaphors of human biology that evoked sliminess. By shifting over to metaphors of steam-power, Ehret suggested rather that the body would reach a higher degree of energy-efficiency and strength with less fuel-intake overall. With such a notion the human body appeared more as a kind of furnace that could produce more "clean" energy with less fuel, a calculus which certainly challenged the laws of conservation of energy. Because of the gains promised, Ehret's ideas were quite successful in the Los Angeles in the early 1920's, and the sanitarium which he erected in downtown was generally well-attended even after Ehret's untimely death in downtown Los Angeles, where he apparently

¹⁵² Arnold Ehret. *Rational Fasting: Regeneration Diet And Natural Cure For All Diseases*.

suffered a basal skull fracture after slipping on an oil stain on the street and falling on his head. As no one actually witnessed his fall, his premature death still is a subject of controversy for those who subscribe to his dietary philosophy, many of whom suspect that there was foul play involved on this fateful evening.¹⁵³ Good friend and convert to Ehret's dietary radicalism, Fred Hirsch, was left to fight out this discursive battle on the merits of fasting and a strict fruit diet with other medical authorities who found his fruitarianism controversial, if not threatening to their livelihoods as doctors. As Sinclair wrote some years earlier, "Not so very long ago I saw a report in some metropolitan newspaper to the effect that the medical profession was greatly alarmed over the decrease in its revenues—it being estimated that the income of the average physician today was less than half of what it had been ten years ago. All this, I think, is directly attributable to the spread of knowledge concerning natural methods in the treatment of disease and, more important yet, of natural methods in the preservation of health."¹⁵⁴ This shows how part of the debates around hygiene and the nature of the body's internal processes also had an economic dimension, and that whole professional existences had been carved out of particular niches in medicinal theory, niches which required maintenance and protection if their practitioners were to continue receiving the revenues they expected.

Ehret's philosophy was essentially an addition to "terrain theory" or an investigation into the ontology of "disposition" that could apply to all individuals, and the insights of bacteriology, while they remained scientifically unchallenged, were thought to be no more relevant to physical health than other primitive theories of disease such as demonic possession. "Looking at it from a

¹⁵³ See Sylvia Saltman. "What Really Happened to Arnold Ehret?" *Vegetarian World Magazine* (USA, 1977)

¹⁵⁴ Upton Sinclair. *The Fasting Cure*. London: William Heinemann, 1911.

philosophical standpoint, this interpretation differs from the mediaeval superstition and the period of fetishism only in the supplemental name. Formerly it was an ‘evil spirit,’ which imagination went so far as to believe in ‘satanic personages;’ now this same dangerous monster is a microscopically visible being whose existence has been proven beyond any doubt.” (3) Such statements place Ehret clearly on the side of endogenous disease etiology; although, he sees it slightly differently. “There is something true in the conception of ‘external invasion’ of a disease, as well as in heredity, however not in the sense that the invader is a spirit (demon) hostile to life, or a microscopic being (bacillus); but all diseases without exception, even the hereditary, are caused—disregarding a few other unhygienic causes—by biologically wrong, ‘unnatural’ food and by each ounce of over-nourishment, only and exclusively.” (4) For Ehret, the secret demon which quietly produces illness is neither the microscopic stowaway that latches onto our networks of nourishment, nor an uncanny case of “spiritual possession;” rather, the eminent and omni-present threat to human health lies in our conventional modes of sustenance, in which toxic parapraes accue to a boiling point of contamination—in other words, human automatism carried out by the force of sheer habit alone.¹⁵⁵ While Ehret also saw a chance for physical salvation in the dry climate of Southern California, free of excessive urban “mucus,” there were other luminaries in modern medicine that saw the promise of physical health that Southern California provided to be the result of a perfect synthesis of the right racial make-up and properties of the climate.

¹⁵⁵ While food gurus and practitioners of fasting cure, such as Paul Bragg, owe much of their thought, and in some cases their lives to Ehret and Sinclair, the major difference between them and Bragg, for example, whose favored maxim in the *Miracle of Fasting* is “flesh is dumb,” is that they seem to believe that the body and flesh were intelligent, and that the human, at least as concerned his dietary habits, was an idiot.



Race-Thinking and Real-Estate in the Desert or the Birth of Los Angeles

While Southern California became the popular destination and birthplace for a variety of alternative lifestyle movements, it was also clearly dominated by the demographic of white Anglo-Saxon protestants. The predominance of this group in the class structure of a fledgling Los Angeles was also no accident; it was an essential part of a developers agenda to lure a moneyed WASPish class out west to unload their amassed fortunes and retirement pensions, primarily into real-estate investments which were clearly overinflated as far as land-value was concerned, considering its aridity and meager water supply. However, this inflated real-estate market was oriented around something else: climate. The promise of health that Los Angeles possessed in the popular imaginary in the late 19th century and into 20th was one finely-crafted by the hand of urban boosters, real-estate investors and medical practitioners, who all emphasized desert-influenced images of health that promoted a quasi-pastoral lifestyle with a mediterranean allure. This image-scape suggested rolling hills, supple citrus groves, a mild, yet dry, climate, and a vigorous culture of the outdoors. Although this culture was more or less an invention by Anglo boosters who mythologized the Spanish-American rancho roots of the region, as well as the purity of Native Americans in their civility toward the natural environment, it seems as though, to a quite a large extent, they often believed it themselves.

Charles Fletcher Lummis, who although had a somewhat infirm constitution, nonetheless came from the school of Teddy Roosevelt vitalism which encouraged a fierce outdoors-man-ship, and when he emigrated to Los Angeles, he came on foot. After accepting a post at the LA Times which was offered to him on the spot by General Otis, founding father of one of Southern

California's earliest dynasties and major booster, when he arrived, he cultivated a scene oriented around a "desert mysticism" in the Arroyo Seco area near Pasadena, holding regular soirées at his house, "El Alisal," that were often attended by celebrities and other urban luminaries.¹⁵⁶ This man was a booster, *par excellence*, a fact that became increasingly obvious when he took the helm of the booster publication *Land of Sunshine*,¹⁵⁷ which extolled the virtues of Southern California climate and lifestyle, two things out of which he seemed to have developed a personal fetish—and quite a lucrative one at that. His enthusiasm for the desert, and the noble and simplistic way of life it fostered also compelled him to lobby on behalf of mistreated and displaced Native Americans in the region, who, in his eyes, were the archetype of human virtue in the desert. Even though Lummis was a vigorous promoter of the region to an often exaggerating extent, which produced massive profits for the land speculation consortium Los Angeles Suburban Homes, he did apparently benefit from the cure-all properties of the landscape he so fanatically praised. Lummis' tracts also oriented themselves toward the elderly and infirm. "These figures may seem somewhat dull, but the significance of them for health and comfort can hardly be overestimated. They mean that there is no day in the year when the invalid need fear that weather conditions will place any obstacle in the way of regaining strength, nor when the person in more robust health need to have the full joy of living clouded by discomfort from that source." (407) In other words, Southern California promises a restorative climate that would only encourage the enjoyment of its inhabitants and promote their health, even if they were in an invalid state.

¹⁵⁶ For a more thorough introduction to Los Angeles history, see Mike Davis. *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992.

¹⁵⁷ *Land of Sunshine: The Magazine of California and the West*. ED. Charles F. Lummis. Los Angeles: The Land of Sunshine Publishing Company, 1901.

However, there were also others who had a much more racially-tinged characterization of the desert lifestyle. J.P. Widney, one of the founding members of USC, found the settlement of the West an essential chapter in the manifest destiny of the Aryan race, and thought the placement of this race in such a climate would finally allow the maximum flourishing of its potentials. David Fine writes:

For Widney the proximity of the desert was the key to the Anglo-Saxon reclamation project. The desert would improve the racial stock by putting the right kind of people in close contact and harmony with natural, and spiritual forces—as the immigrant infested eastern city could not. Physical and spiritual health were linked to the desert, which evoked the sublime in the effects of light, the unbroken vista of sky, and the eternal stillness of a landscape that transcended history and change. It bespoke the enduring, the immortal, and the simple, natural lives of the primordial population—that is to say before those same idealized Indians were extirpated, their cultures erased, and their numbers decimated.¹⁵⁸

Widney was also an extremely important booster figure in the region, in terms of real-estate development, as well as medical science. He was a founding father of the Southern California Medical Association, which was responsible for determining legitimate from illegitimate medical practice. Prior to 1876, before the passing of an anti-quackery bill, anyone could practice medicine in Southern California, and they did not require a license to do so. Many doctors would advertise for their practices in newspapers, which, like most advertising, tended toward exaggeration, a fact which also made it difficult to distinguish between doctors with a clear training in medicine and those without such qualifications.

Widney was also a pioneer in the field of medical topography, a field within Victorian science that sought to combine meteorology, geology, biology and medicine to determine the

¹⁵⁸ David Fine. *Imagining Los Angeles: A City in Fiction*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000. p. 44

ways in which climate and health (and race) were interrelated. By examining a multiplicity of factors, including the water table and average temperature variables, this committee, which worked under the auspices of the Southern California Medical Society, worked to establish the ultimate links between environment and disease. This work had the stated purpose of proving scientifically how climate might provide a cure for certain ailments beyond mere medical speculation or trial and error diagnoses. This, of course, would grant more modern scientific credibility to medical advice, such as moving to a dryer climate to lessen the severity of symptoms of respiratory conditions. However, what remains suspect about what appears otherwise to be an admirable scientific endeavor to increase knowledge within the field of pathology, is that Widney himself was a real-estate developer, whose own settlement “Widney-by-the-Desert” sold land at ridiculously inflated prices (2000% in some cases), land that was more or less glorified because of the climate’s beneficial effects on health. While the science may have been undisputed, the gathering of evidence was also connected to the garnering of real-estate profits, profits which were so obscene that he was able to retire from his medical practice at 55 and devote the rest of time to writing massive tomes on Aryan supremacy.

Widney also believed that “humidifying” the desert in a bit of 19th century terraforming would also help to improve the water problems of the region which presented a significant roadblock to continued real-estate development. After the first real-estate boom in 1886-1887 and a cholera epidemic, it became clear that the water problem would be a top priority. By flooding the Colorado River into the dry-lake bed to bring back the Salton Sea, Widney projected that such a body of water would increase rainfall in the region and minimize desert aridity. However, such a result was not altogether desired by the population because it was thought that

the dryness of the air was one of the most salient healthful characteristics of the Southern California climate, and that more moisture in that atmosphere would simply generate higher humidity—a fact which would make Los Angeles’s climate more difficult to distinguish from those back-east. Widney’s projections were shown to be true when the Colorado flooded on its own, and the overall humidity did partially increase. This fact, although he admitted it was a boon for farming, demonstrated that such humidification would make the region “less agreeable for residence,” and should thus be avoided at all costs. This difficult conundrum between preserving the dryness of climate, and yet having enough safe water to sustain the kind of growth planned for the region is probably one of Los Angeles’ most famous and most corrupt aspects of its history, a story of a conspiracy to steal water from the Owens Valley in order to sustain new suburban subdivisions in the San Fernando Valley, a story famously narrativized in Polanski’s and Towne’s *Chinatown*.¹⁵⁹

Widney also co-authored a promotional book with Walter Lindley, the city’s first public health minister, called *California of the South*,¹⁶⁰ in which they both discussed the virtues of landscape and climate and made a clear attempt to distance images of Southern California from its northern counterpart. While ecologically correct that Northern California is truly a collection of biomes quite distinct from California “of the South,” it appears that part of this effort was to make sure that none of their readers would associate California with the moist and foggy San Francisco. In the first section of the book, penned by Widney, one can see the fruits of his labors in medical topography, as toward the end he discusses how the climate is medically beneficial for

¹⁵⁹ *Chinatown*. Dir. Roman Polanski. Paramount Pictures, 1974. Film

¹⁶⁰ Walter Lindley and Joseph Pomeroy Widney. *California of the South*. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1896.

all types of physical, as well as nervous, ailments. “The cases which may hope for benefit by coming to Southern California are, first and foremost, the feeble and invalid from whatever cause; those who find the drain upon vitality in a harsh climate too great for them...For such, and for all who are suffering from the nervous prostration of overwork, there is probably no better climate to be found. It is a climate in which the drain upon vitality is, with any proper manner of living, less than the gain.” (63-64) While Widney makes clear the exact profile of the people who could benefit most from the climate, he also explains that Los Angeles is not an appropriate place for those without means.

In consumption a great mistake is often made. Cases by the hundreds arrive in Southern California which would be much better off at home. No climate can claim to be a cure-all. It should be considered, before starting an invalid upon so long a trip, whether there is strength to endure the fatigue of the journey. Many, too, come without friends or acquaintances, and literally die of homesickness. Many also come who, through lack of means, or through a mistaken economy, rent cold, shady rooms, and live at restaurants, and so, missing the comforts of their home life, are worse of than if they had never started. (64)

Here Widney claims that Southern California will not provide instant relief to chronic symptoms, and thus should not be thought of as a temporary destination like a retreat or a spa. One should plan to come for good and with enough resources to pay for the life that the city can offer. As he says, “It must not be a trip, but a migration.” In this one gesture, Widney sketches the profile of the new resident he is trying lure. He should be old, infirm with some chronic illness, in possession of a handsome pension or retirement package, and ready to make a new home (read: buy real-estate.)

But perhaps what is most striking about Widney’s calls to the desert are his assertions that the climate would ultimately lead to racial improvement. “The best of all prospects is for the

person or the family inheriting the tendency, but in whom it is yet dormant. To them there is a well-founded hope that the disease may remain dormant, and to their children, born and reared in the new home, a prospect of its entire eradication from the blood.” (66) At this point, Widney has moved beyond the palliative powers of climate and into race engineering, suggesting that climate would naturally select the best racial features and allow others to remain dormant. He also seems to be suggesting that if the right racial features come into contact with the appropriate climate, it may be possible to transcend illness. Widney clearly believed in some form of vital, racial intelligence which inhered between the members of a particular ethnic group, and that this racial entity, when provided with the right environmental conditions, would engineer all its defects away with any direct intervention. Similar to how the fast allows the pure innate energies and “vital intelligence” of the body to emerge, here the right climatic features would unlock a “racial destiny,” allowing an innate racial intelligence to refine its flock. This is essentially his argument in the *Race Life of Aryan Peoples*,¹⁶¹ a two-volume behemoth that argued that the desert climate of the west was the final frontier for the Aryan race, and would allow them to attain the greatness that is their birthright.

In the end, though, it seems that Widney’s life-work served the higher purpose of answering to his revelations, in which he claimed to have been addressed directly by God in the desert. Although he believed that God was the same for all peoples of the world, and that really in principle no race was superior to another, but rather just required its own climate to thrive, the visions which he experienced in the desert also conveyed to him the destiny of the Aryan race, or

¹⁶¹ Joseph Pomeroy Widney. *Race Life of Aryan Peoples*. New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1907.

what he referred to as the Engle people,¹⁶² to settle in Southern California. As Kevin Starr writes, “As an army doctor in the Southwest, Widney wrote, he had treated the Engles as they followed the sun. Pioneer life had a been a racial testing, a process of natural selection. The Engle had passed the test. He had conquered the land and vanquished the Indian. ‘It is Law,’ he writes, ‘the Law of survival of fittest. We may pity the weak: but we cannot change the workings of the Law.’ Now, in the post-frontier era the Engle stood to move upward to a higher civilization.”¹⁶³ (91) It is fitting that Widney also makes direct reference to the sun, which fits quite easily into the cosmology of other Aryanist movements in Germany and Austria, such as the Artaman league,¹⁶⁴ particularly in Germany, which sought to resurrect sun-worship as a racial trait.¹⁶⁵ However, while most of these movements were characterized by a hatred of the city and advocated a return to the countryside and an agricultural way of life,¹⁶⁶ Widney’s own brand of sun-cult revivalism became a major thrust behind the making of a major metropolis.

After having a mystical experience in desert, his life was forever altered, and although he remained a monotheist Christian, he eventually started his own non-denominational church, which invited all those open to communion with God, and delved into a new syncretic vision of spirituality. Widney could have easily drifted over to the ranks of the Theosophists and to the

¹⁶² Widney also claimed that the famous image of Uncle Sam was an accurate pictorial representation of the Engle race.

¹⁶³ Kevin Starr. *Inventing the Dream*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

¹⁶⁴ The Artaman League was an Aryanist movement in Germany in the late 19th Century which advocated a return to the countryside and promoted a “revival” of Aryan cultural traits and mythology.

¹⁶⁵ This was unfortunately a section which I had to leave out in the interest of time, but I plan to reintegrate for comparative focus at some future date. I hoped to have a comparative analysis of the complex of occult, Aryanist, body-culture, anti-metropolis movements from turn-of-the-century Berlin with similar kinds of movements in the Southern California area.

¹⁶⁶ See Klaus Bergmann. *Agrarromantik und Grossstadtfeindschaft*. Meisenheim am Glan: Verlag Anton Hain, 1970.

New Thought movement which taught that God was an omnipresent spiritual force, but he remained firmly upon biblical ground. His desert awakening to a universal life-force compelled him to take an interest in other Eastern systems of thought, which also pushed into more evangelical sectors of Christianity (where he also started the evangelical church, The Church of Nazarene, which emphasized the evangelization of the poor.) But interestingly enough, one of the larger disagreements he had with other pastors was over the issue of “divine healing,” which Widney, a staunch physician, refuted. This last point is important because no matter how far Widney’s approaches dabble with an occultism buttressed by racist tenants, he never compromised his commitments to allopathy, an allegiance that, of course, brought him quite large revenues from his medical practice, but also made his other theories appear more scientific. This aspect of Widney’s belief structure is symbolic for Los Angeles boosterism as a whole in that in order to realize the fantastical idea of racial utopia, one should rather enlist the authority of science to practically achieve this.



The Microbiology of Otherness and the Role of Chinatown

The emergence of institutions of public health in Los Angeles had a dubious connection to racist segregation, as well as to the promotion of real-estate. As can be seen in the information pamphlet *California of the South*,¹⁶⁷ really a work of advertising designed to lure an aging WASPish demographic out to Southern California in order to make a profit, its second author, Walter Lindley, was also the city’s first Public Health Officer. As Natalia Molina demonstrates,

¹⁶⁷ Walter Lindley and Joseph Pomeroy Widney. *California of the South*. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1896.

public health institutions were often in the business of attaching a stigma to particular ethnic groups that associated them with infection and a lack of sanitation. This is shown most clearly in the case of Chinatown, an area of the city neglected by almost all modernization measures excepting those which directly hampered the economic behavior of Chinese vegetable peddlers and launderers. Otherwise, the area was afflicted by the dumping of raw sewage. Yet those in charge shifted the blame onto race and genetic characteristics, producing a panic in the pattern of “yellow fever” that demonized the Chinese as threat to WASP society and health.

The fledgling office of public health did develop various modernization measures in the areas of sewage and disease control, but these developments affected almost all regions of the city of Los Angeles, except for Chinatown. “New understandings regarding the poisonous nature of bodily wastes spurred broader changes in urban infrastructure as well. Public health advocates in all major cities stressed the importance of “pure” water supplies and efficient garbage and sewage disposal...Safeguarding the city’s image and protecting its citizens’ health were two sides of a single coin.”¹⁶⁸ (28) This call for inner-city sanitation was taken on by the public health authorities; however, as Molina notes, “Structural improvements bypassed Chinatown.” It was almost as if Chinatown was needed as a scapegoat for causes of urban pollution and thus, the Chinese were more or less ghettoized into conditions which fostered an unsanitary existence. This, of course, led to further stigmatization of the Chinese beyond the orientalist racism they already had to endure up until that point.

Public health officials considered segregation or relocation viable solutions because they persistently traced the source of Chinese immigrants’ deplorable living conditions to this group’s personal habits and cultural proclivities. The lamentable truth they concluded, was that Chinese

¹⁶⁸ Natalia Molina. *Fit to be Citizens?* Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006.

people would always be disease carriers. They were dirty by nature, they preferred to live in crowded, ramshackle housing, and they seemed incapable of either learning or practicing good hygiene. In the short term, the best that could be hoped for was to limit their contact with other city residents. In the long term, tighter controls over immigration and stronger municipal codes might result in satisfactory reduction in the population. (26)

The Chinese, who were already ostracized from the Anglo-Saxon imaginary of Los Angeles, became increasingly saturated with signifiers of impurity and illness, a fact which also severely impacted their economic behavior and power. Even though the Chinese owned very little of the real-estate in which they lived, they were still blamed for all of the public dangers associated with it. With this association with disease, that in most cases proved also to be completely fictitious, and produced out of panic, their ability to practice their professions, primarily in the peddling of vegetables and laundry service, became increasingly limited.

The stigma of disease attached to the Chinese seemed to rest upon a bogus central claim: namely, that the Chinese were constitutionally incapable of fighting off diseases with their immune systems *and* constitutionally incapable of practicing correct hygiene. In other words, the Chinese were considered deficient at properly policing the boundary between themselves and the external environment. They were labeled as degenerate for appearing more and more indistinguishable from the poverty-stricken and polluted circumstances in which they were forced to live. The complicated logic of segregation in this case demonizes a population for “resembling” a squalor which they did not produce, meaning that, if we were to follow Widney’s correlation between climate, environment and racial characteristics, the Chinese’ so-called racial characteristics are those “unlocked” or catalyzed by their outside environment, an environment

that was Chinatown, an abject depository for raw sewage, crime and other ills of the rest of the society.

Thus, the Chinese were demonized by both sides of the debates around disease pathology. One approach toward pathology suggested an entire logic of contagion, contamination and a world of invisible enemies, while the other was more of an indictment against certain constitutions and terrains that would allow the proliferation of unwanted microorganisms, environments too constitutionally weak to properly defend themselves. The conversion of both logics into racist approaches to urban population management can be seen quiet starkly in the politics of Los Angeles' emergence, in that certain groups were demonized for having weak constitutions and poor hygiene and therefore, a higher susceptibility to disease (a phenomenon mostly caused by racist health codes and zoning techniques that subjected certain groups to raw sewage and unsafe water sources). Once diseases were shown statistically to have a higher incidence within certain populations, these groups were figured as dangerous, infectious carriers of disease that, if given access to hubs of everyday commerce and public space, would contaminate the rest of the population. Both the endogenous and exogenous theories of pathology availed themselves as raw material for racist distortion, but for Los Angeles, it is the particular combination of the two competing theories that helped produce such thorough segregation and entrenched racism within its urban organization. However, this attack on the microbiology of otherness could not erase the need for labor from the life-processes of these marginalized groups, regardless of their degree of hygiene.

Hygiene is commonly understood to be the set of practices which are undertaken at regular intervals to mitigate against the buildup of disease-causing agents on the surface of the

human body or in its environment, an accumulation which apparently will continue invisibly until a critical mass of infectious proportion is reached that undermines the vital processes of the host organism. Hygiene describes the field of practices deployed to stem this automatic growth. However, there are plenty of cases in which the practices of hygiene have come to supplant homeostatic or immunological processes because these processes, which are germane to the organism and encoded into its operative norm, were not sufficient enough to prevent such accumulations. This is where hygiene becomes medicinal and deliberately supplants actions that the body should be taking on its own. An increased yogurt diet to balance ph levels within the intestinal tracts, for example, may be helpful for those with overly acidic digestive tracts, and may encourage growth of internal flora conducive to healthy digestion. While diet and medicine may appear as distinct from other modalities of hygiene, it appears that really the only thing which distinguishes them is they are oriented towards the inside of the body, while hygiene is more commonly associated with the outside of the body and its environment. But if one washes one's hands to disinfect them from excessive bacterial growth or if one consumes different foods to discourage the build-up of certain kinds of toxic microorganisms, what truly distinguishes them other than an inside/outside distinction? This problematizes the nature of hygiene as both something external and belonging to the realm of conscious practice, i.e. outside the purview of immune system and other "automatic" processes.

This point of indistinction between hygiene and the automatic processes of body's immunological constitution furnishes the basis of certain kinds of race-thinking which examine the automatisms of the internal environment, racial make-up and hygienic habits of different ethnic groups as a composite entity. The logic of degeneration oft-deployed by various race

theorists is that certain groups have more difficulty keeping themselves at a great enough distance from the environments in which they inhabit, which leads to the conclusion that behind both the actions of conscious individuals (hygiene) and their genetically-informed automatic processes (immunology and homeostasis) there lies a racial intelligence that is deficient in governing the way groups of people maintain sovereignty from the microbiological dimension of their environments. This elision of the two kinds of hygiene, conscious and automatic, into one umbrella category is characteristic of various kinds of race-thinking which see behavior and biology as governed by a racial entity that can be found in all members of the group, even though this racial entity's existence and behavior tends only to be proven by examining the statistics and aesthetics of a racial group's immunology and living conditions.

Yet, hygiene also, of course, refers to the additional actions taken by the individual and members of the group to aid in this process of separation from internal and external environments. In a certain sense, those individuals whose existences are characterized by "weak hygiene" which includes poor immune responses, postulated to be a property of racial or genetic stock, as well as bad habits in terms of cleanliness and food preparation, attributes which belong more to the sphere of learned behaviors, are feared to be a cause of generalized weakness in hygiene within the overall population. Thus, the concept of hygiene already plays quite dangerously on the margins of the social and the biological, and in the distinction between "nature and culture." This also entails that infection by certain kinds of illness also essentially means *the transmission of weak hygiene* at the level of the social, which brings up the specter of racial degeneration. Because all vital organisms in a given region may be interconnected through the medium of a social body, *this also introduces the anxiety that the very susceptibility to*

illnesses is itself infectious and transmissible through such a medium. As we saw in Molina's argument, the Chinese were perceived as a lesser race partially because their living conditions were not hygienic, and that they somehow resembled these conditions too closely. The white population of Southern California was also afraid, beyond the fear of infection, of somehow becoming like the Chinese, and losing their hygienic distance from the urban environment which was growing in its abjection all around them. This racist fear simultaneously contains an admission that the white race as an entity may not really be a static one (which even Widney would agree with because the race essentially evolves with climate) and is vulnerable to contamination and transmutation (an issue we will address in chapter 5).

Although made much later in the century, Roman Polanski's and Robert Towne's 1974 *Chinatown*¹⁶⁹ contains a very incisive argument concerning the exclusion/scapegoat problem which the Chinese faced within the greater Los Angeles economy. Ultimately, the film tells the story of one of the greatest crimes in Southern California history that supplied the region with the water it needed for exponential growth, a crime not only white-collar, but clearly committed by the *white man*. This, of course, begs the question why the film is called *Chinatown* when none of its central characters are Chinese and only the very last scene in the film takes place in this part of the city. The role of the Chinese in the film is one of both quiet invisibility, and, simultaneously, of an extreme proximity to the crimes of others, even though none of them committed any of them. It seems as if the Chinese, as a racial group, perform the civic role of lining the ruptures and cracks within the moral continuum of the community at large. In good noir fashion, *Chinatown* exposes how social figures of wealth and power are also the greatest

¹⁶⁹ *Chinatown*. Dir. Roman Polanski. Paramount Pictures, 1974. Film

criminals, and yet must also keep the two poles of their double identity separate from one another at all costs. It appears that this is the role of the Chinese: they act as a buffer between supposedly upstanding men and their heinous crimes, insuring that these two are never associated with one another. Thus, it appears that the Chinese absorb the abjection and moral depravity of others, and as such, provide a necessary service for the entire racial ecology of Southern California, as the race stigmatized by the crime and filth of others, so other races do not have to live with these associations attached to them.

In the film, this can be seen most clearly at the scene of the crime, which is not registered as such until private investigator Jake Gittes returns to the Mulwray mansion for a second time and remembers his misinterpretation of what the Chinese gardner says, “Water—bad for glass.” When he sees the gardner again, he repeats this phrase to which the gardner responds, “Salt water—bad for grass.” This small salt-water “tide-pool” fountain at the crests of the Hollywood Hills was the site where Hollis Mulwray was viciously drowned by Noah Cross, the real-estate tycoon and incestuous rapist. Here, the crime scene is literally “tended” by the Chinese gardner who is clearly unaware that any foul play had ever occurred there, but who nonetheless was the first form of mediation between Gittes and the actual crime. This mediation which Chinese people perform for wealthy whites can be seen again in the case of Chan’s protection of Mrs. Mulwray’s daughter/sister. While he was tasked to keep her safe and out of sight of Cross and his henchmen, his presence indicates something criminal to Gittes when he spies on them both in the house, leading him to claim that Mrs. Mulwray had kidnapped the girl and was keeping her against her will (Gittes, however, as someone familiar with the normality of moral depravity never seems to blame the Chinese for any of the crimes they are connected to.) As we learn later

on in the film, the actual crime committed was one of incest by the Noah Cross, wealthy developer of the region.

The last scene in which such a mediation occurs is, of course, the final scene which takes place in Chinatown, in which Mrs. Mulwray is shot while trying to escape from Cross and the police. The only reason why they are in this part of the city is because the Mulwrays' maid is allowing them to hide at her house. In essence, the tragedy which occurs at the end of the movie has nothing to do with the Chinese or Chinatown itself, yet Chinatown "surrounds" the event, somehow mediating between the criminals and their crimes in such a way that they will be blamed for them, if not at least indefatigably associated with them. Chinatown and the Chinese as a downtrodden race in the LA area are here figured as an outlet for the crimes of the insulated elite, crimes which are necessarily part of the structure of wealth accumulation in Southern California, but which are also structurally veiled. The Chinese then become the physical representation of structural corruption within the moral ecology of LA. Structural corruption suggests the contradictory co-presence of evil within the lives of civic heroes who made a place for everyone else to live, but in order for the system to function, structural corruption must be distributed out of the moral centers of such a civilization and into its periphery, its "swampland" that is both the site of evil and place that can absorb it. Chinatown is perceived as rank with criminality because other people go there to commit their crimes.



Contagious Crowds and the Primitive Mechanism

In Los Angeles, the obsession with physical and mental health generated a relative explosion of alternative lifestyle movements, which emphasized novel therapies and philosophies in the service of determining the origins and treatments for a variety of ailments. However, from our examination in the last sections, both the alternative cures, along with their allopathic counterparts, rested upon the foundations of vitalistic thought, suggesting that true healing would result from establishing clear contact with and submitting to the powers of an innate intelligence, one which was constructed in separate instances as both a vitalistic soul quietly manipulating the gears of the human mechanism or as a “vitalistic race” which would determine the correct course of action for all its members and guard against degeneration. While both sides of this urban vitalism are concerned with the straitjacketing of automatic processes and allowing the pure energies of the body or the race to emerge unadulterated, the people who became followers of these different branches of urban vitalism often appeared to be the opposite of sovereign, strong-willed individuals, and rather, appeared to be like “cult-followers” who had no true will or direction of their own. In this manner, the cultivation and conjuring-up of the vitalistic soul (and its racial equivalent by those of a more white-supremacist bent) within the masses, results in their further mechanization under the hands of various gurus and dictators.

This logic also functions the sphere of socially communicable phenomena in that those of weak will, or of infirm moral constitution are thought to be much more susceptible to the pernicious ideas and suggestions of others. In the same way that a strong constitution and healthy immune response to pathogens curbs the spread of toxicity within the human body, the presence

of a strong will was thought to prevent noxious ideas from taking root within the human psyche. However, the nature of such a will, which would prevent the uptake of unwanted behavior and perceptions, is somewhat difficult to define, let alone encourage. The so-called weak-willed appear simply to be this way due to their constitutions, and thus, would require other kinds of treatment to remove or mitigate undesired tendencies, both corporeally and psychologically. As Athena Vrettos states in her *Somatic Fictions*,¹⁷⁰

This dissolution of ontological boundaries suggested the possibility of a kind of mental or neurological contagion comparable to epidemics of organic disease (Ray, 180). Described as a kind of mass hypnosis, or free-floating transmission of emotions, nervous contagion could sap the moral strength and force of will, allowing people to be influenced by or to identify themselves with the actions or directions of others. Combining medical concerns about weak nerves with sociological interest in intermental psychology, speculations about nervous contagion developed in conjunction with late-nineteenth century crowd theory, which in turn grew out of the various nineteenth-century reactions and reassessments of the French Revolution. Drawing on bacteriology as a model, Gustave Le Bon claimed that ‘ideas, sentiments, emotions, and beliefs possess in crowds a contagious power as intense as that of microbes’.....most crowd theorists agreed that the motivating force was some form of “moral contagion”, “suggestion”, imitation”, or hypnosis... (84)

In this case, a concentration of energies which appear in crowd-formations is responsible for the pathological effects of such “ideas” and “suggestions,” which may have otherwise remained the mere delusions of an insane individual. They become, however, more pernicious in contagious circulation within a social body. Within the crowd, the weakness of will may become a powerful social force that is capable of flattening all adversaries.

¹⁷⁰ Athena Vrettos. *Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Culture*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995.

Nathaniel West's *Day of the Locust*¹⁷¹ is a classic Hollywood novel that in many ways should be regarded as a progenitor of various postmodern works, as well as the climax of the early Hollywood novel. Overall, the novel sketches a serious portrait of the absurd in Los Angeles, shedding light on the often "inhuman" nature of Hollywood's pantheon of socially integrated freaks. While this portrayal could be accused of lacking psychological depth—except in the case of "protagonist" Tod Hackett whose "east-coast" gaze was always skeptical enough—West's novel moves with sardonic precision over their gaudy exteriors to reveal a range of brute mechanisms at work, which seem to stand-in for emotions. It seems that West takes his liberties like a scientist would by placing these characters into situations that are few degrees hotter than normal in the attempt to divine the true nature which lies within them. West also attempts to profile the types of people who migrated to the city and to identify their reasons for doing so. And from this analysis, it seems that these reasons can be subsumed under three categories: one, those who came to LA to die; two, those who came to be part of the Hollywood machine; and finally, those seeking esoteric guidance and fringe religiosity. While the novel itself does not so much address the industries which cater to these people, absorbing their money and/or labor, it does aim to show what such an agglomeration of people can ultimately lead to, or rather what the nature of its unity is—a law of the lowest common denominator, which, it turns out, is strangely not so dissimilar from a war of all against all.

This is most blatant at the end of the story when a film premier turns into an ugly riot situation where people within the crowd are suddenly plagued with violent behaviors and desires which they would normally abstain from. One of the most horrific examples of this eruption of

¹⁷¹ Nathaniel West. *Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust*. New York: New Directions, 1962.

abnormal impulses is when Homer Simpson, otherwise an excessively passive, mild-mannered mid-westerner who had come to LA due to health reasons, violently attacks the boy Adore Loomis who had been taunting him. After a certain point Homer snaps the boy over his knee and beats him senseless, possibly to death. We are briefly introduced to the character of Adore Loomis earlier in the story when he appears with his mother behind Homer's house. During the interaction between Hackett, Simpson and the mother and son, we learn that Mrs. Loomis is pushing her son into Hollywood song and dance with a vengeance, always making him perform in front of new audiences, which in this case, was Todd and Homer. Mrs. Loomis also explains that she is an "old settler" and that Los Angeles is "Paradise on Earth," and then asks them both about their spiritual orientation. "Her next question surprised them both. 'Who do you follow?' 'What?' said Tod. 'I mean—in the Search for Health, along the Road of Life?' 'I'm a raw-foodist, myself,' she said. 'Dr. Pierce is our leader. You must have seen his ads—"Know-All Pierce-All."'" (105) In the character of Mrs. Loomis, we find an interesting combination of LA types. But firstly, her name also is in itself quite significant because it seems to be a clear reference to Charles Fletcher Lummis, one of founding boosters of the city, who worked tirelessly to mythologize Los Angeles as a mystical desert paradise with healing properties. The fact that she calls herself an 'old settler' also alludes to this connection, and her natural inquiry into the "health-belief-system" of her neighbors also makes quite a solid connection between health-belief cults and faddism, and the birth of the city. The fact that these aspects of LA's inception are trying to enter Hollywood in this later generation, personified as Adore Loomis, allegorizes the transition from a real-estate economy based upon the mythologizing of health into the spectacle economy of the film industry.

The novel also addresses the modalities of racial prejudice in Los Angeles and even how they are institutionally embedded within the city's municipal organizations. For example, in the novel, after Harry Greener died and his daughter Faye moved into Homer Simpson's house, she invited her friends, Miguel "the Mexican" and Earle, to live in the garage while they looked for employment. One night they organized a cock-fight with Miguel's fighting roosters in order to entertain guests and make some extra money. While all of this distressed Homer, he was too passive to get rid of them. When he eventually confided his distress in Tod, Tod told him that a sure-fire way to get rid of the Mexican would be to call the board of health (a service he offered to perform himself the next day, which also hints at his own racial anxiety.) Tod's strategy suggests that it was common practice in Los Angeles that the forced eviction of Mexicans could be carried out by appealing to the protocols of public health institutions. The connection between Mexicans and an unhygienic way of life was a dominant ideology during this time, which justified racist mistreatment by invoking fears of contagion and the specters of virulent microbiology. While in this case it is true that Miguel was rooming with roosters in the garage, the stigma of Mexicans being too microbiologically intimate with other animal species made it easier to zone them out of certain neighborhoods.

Tod Hackett is a convenient narrative focal point because he is also in the process of classifying LA character types to include within his apocalyptic painting "The Burning of Los Angeles." Therefore, his attention to the hidden capacities of individual characters is quite keen, especially when we examine the character of Homer Simpson. As the narrator describes, "Tod examined him eagerly. He didn't mean to be rude but at first glance this man seemed an exact model for the kind of person who comes to California to die, perfect in every detail down to

fever eyes and unruly hands.” (27)¹⁷² From this introduction, it is clear that Homer moved to California from a small town in Iowa after working for twenty years in a hotel because of health problems, in this case a respiratory sickness, one of many people who had built up a life savings, but had become somewhat debilitated by illness, that came out west with the promise that he or she would be cured. This promise of the Southern California climate is, of course, precisely the ideology of health championed by the likes of Lummis and Widney. It is thus telling that in the scene where Homer loses himself in the crowd and fights the young Loomis, he is actually beating the namesake of the very personage whose efforts to make profits in real-estate lured people like himself out west in the first place. On the one hand, this scene suggests that the efforts of Lummis and other boosters ultimately would culminate in the proto-fascist behavior of the crowd lead by the hand of some faddist, food-cult dictator. “A super ‘Dr. Know-All Pierce-All’ had made the necessary promise and they were marching behind his banner in a great unified front of screwballs and screwboxes to purify the land. No longer bored, they sang and danced joyously in the red light of the flames.”¹⁷³ On the other hand, it also suggests the failure of the promises of Lummis to deliver, and that rather than paradise, the Los Angeles landscape began to look more like one characterized by urban violence and scenes of apocalyptic doom.

When Homer becomes violent, it is not a violence characterized by sheer rage, but rather by heightened mechanization. Early on in the novel when we are introduced to Homer, he is described as a “poorly made automaton,” a description which is used again when he becomes part of the violent mob. “Homer walked more than ever like a badly made automaton and his

¹⁷² For an examination of monstrosity in the expressionist sense and West’s novel, see Rogers, Martin. “Monstrous Modernism and *The Day of the Locust*.”

¹⁷³ Nathaniel West. *Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust*. New York: New Directions, 1962. p. 165

features were set in a rigid mechanical grin.” (157) However, it is almost as if the true power laden within his automaton figure could only be released in a such a crowd formation, an important aspect of Gustave Le Bon’s theory of crowds¹⁷⁴ which combines both the primitive and mechanistic into a new force. At the simplest level, agents become substantively different within the body of a crowd, temporarily losing their elemental properties and merging into a collectively determined material. “What really takes place is a combination followed by the creation of new characteristics, just as in chemistry certain elements, when brought into contact -- bases and acids, for example -- combine to form a new body possessing properties quite different from those of the bodies that have served to form it.” (7) However, Le Bon’s analysis of crowds and the unconscious also lead him to postulate the existence of a kind of racial unconscious which underlies the motivations of various individuals, comprised of hereditary input passed down from generation to generation. This basic racial mold which shapes the dispositions of individuals, who may be quite divergent in terms of their interests or intellectual pursuits, but at the instinctual level appear to be quite homogenous, is what becomes activated in crowd constellations. “It is precisely these general qualities of character, governed by forces of which we are unconscious, and possessed by the majority of the normal individuals of a race in much the same degree—it is precisely these qualities, I say, that in crowds become common property. In the collective mind the intellectual aptitudes of the individuals, and in consequence their individuality, are weakened. The heterogeneous is swamped by the homogeneous, and the unconscious qualities obtain the upper hand.” (8-9) Here, Le Bon shows that unconscious attributes of individuals that form the average characteristics of their race are what become

¹⁷⁴ Gustave Le Bon. *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1896.

exposed in crowd formations, meaning that crowds will of course exhibit that which is the most base and of the lowest common denominator.

However, what is truly remarkable about Le Bon's work is his notion of vectors of contagion in crowds. "Contagion is a phenomenon of which it is easy to establish the presence, but that it is not easy to explain. It must be classed among those phenomena of a hypnotic order, which we shall shortly study. In a crowd every sentiment and act is contagious, and contagious to such a degree that an individual readily sacrifices his personal interest to the collective interest. This is an aptitude very contrary to his nature, and of which a man is scarcely capable, except when he makes part of a crowd." (10) It is almost as if when an individual joins a crowd, he becomes part of medium in which vectors of contagion may travel very quickly and express themselves with dramatic ease, as if the very fibers that hold together a group identity may emerge in a primal pattern. This pattern can also itself be characterized as contagiousness. Le Bon also mentions that this contagiousness must be considered part of a hypnotic order in which suggestibility can make individuals unaware of their own actions. As a member of the crowd the individual appears to be no longer guided by his own will. Thus, the individual in the crowd becomes "an automaton," yet also "descends several rungs in the ladder of civilization," becoming more like a barbarian.

This point is important because it is a *synthesis of both a modern notion of the human individual as a vital machine and a notion of primitive man submitting to the powers of instinct*. The automaton, which is the most artificial, blurs into indistinction with the primitive, which is the most primal, an instance also quite pertinent to Lang's *Metropolis*¹⁷⁵ (with the major

¹⁷⁵ *Metropolis*. Dir. Fritz Lang. Ufa, 1927. Film.

exception that West's violent mob is neither comprised of the working classes or the lumpenproletariat, but rather the middle classes on a permanent hiatus from work.) While Tod was attempting to find footing in the violent crowd, he began to view the scenario unfolding around him through the medium of his own painting "The Burning of Los Angeles," a medium which brought clarity and focus to all the chaos underway.

As he stood on his good leg, clinging desperately to the iron rail, he could see all the rough charcoal strokes with which he blocked it out on the big canvas. Across the top, parallel with the frame, he had drawn the burning city, a great bonfire of architectural styles, ranging from ancient Egyptian to Cape Cod colonial. Through the center, winding from the left to the right, was a long hill street and down it, spilling into the middle foreground, came the mob carrying baseball bats and torches. For the faces of its members, he was using the innumerable sketches he had made of the people who come to California to die; the cultists of all sorts, economic as well as religious, the wave, airplane, funeral and preview watchers—all those poor devils who can only be stirred by the promise of miracles and then only to violence.¹⁷⁶

This sector of Los Angeles society, while lampooned in the novel, that was lured to the region by climate and possibly, the promise of true entertainment; however, the final scene demonstrates the bankruptcy of such promises of the culture industry, and how its products often have proto-fascist dimensions. As Mathew Roberts states, "It would be difficult to find a work of American fiction more plainly resonant with Adorno's culture industry thesis than *The Day of the Locust*, Nathanael West's novel of Hollywood in the late 1930s. Unique among literary treatments of Hollywood in its time, *Locust* offers a critique of the "dream factory" not merely as a purveyor of kitsch or cultural inauthenticity, nor even as a mechanism of ideological control, but as a mechanism of control based precisely on *mass-mediated desires*--"promises" of leisure, of

¹⁷⁶ Nathaniel West. *Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust*. New York: New Directions, 1962. p.165

spectacle, of sexual satisfaction--which are at once empty and wholly irresistible to the masses of "cheated" consumers."¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁷ Mathew Roberts. "Bonfire of the Avant-Garde: Cultural Rage and Readerly Complicity in *The Day of the Locust*." Modern Fiction Studies 42.1 (1996) 61-90

Chapter 4: The Work of Art, the Fictional Event and the Fraudulent Disease: Adorno, Mann and Film Noir in Los Angeles

This chapter will focus primarily on the writings and films produced by several German exiles living in Los Angeles during the mid-forties with an emphasis on how the image and culture of Los Angeles instantiates itself in subtle ways into their works. I will also examine how the content and aesthetics of a certain branch of film noir shares many thematic parallels with some of the major works of the Frankfurt School written in Los Angeles. While this chapter in no way intends to exhaustively explore even the early film noir cycle in the first half of the 1940's, I do hope to demonstrate that prominent ethical and aesthetic features of the genre must acknowledge, in no small part, the influence and *Weltanschauung* of their German contributors. By tracing the themes of mimicry, disenchantment, and the eruption of the mythical within rationalized society, I hope to show how works in the film noir genre, particularly *Double Indemnity*,¹⁷⁸ provide a complementary insight into the particularly Adornian question concerning the relationship between the problems of individual ethics in a society defined by the almost-complete victory of rationalization, and the status of myth within a historical epoch defined by the hegemony of the scientific paradigm, a thematic duly explored as well by Thomas Mann in his *Doctor Faustus*.¹⁷⁹ By placing particular emphasis on the trope of mimicry in nature, I hope to bring clarity to certain anthropological dimensions of Adornian thought that also are deeply connected to core ethical foundations of his philosophy—particularly in the regard to the

¹⁷⁸ *Double Indemnity*. Dir. Billy Wilder. Paramount Pictures, 1944. Film.

¹⁷⁹ Thomas Mann. *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkühn as Told by a Friend*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992.

appearance of symptoms of “unmanaged life” which in his eyes is also very similar to his notion of “undamaged life.”¹⁸⁰ By examining the trope of the mimicry of nature and the objective world (and the “shamanic”¹⁸¹ and magical history this entails), and its inverse, the mimicry of vital processes by objective tendencies and biopolitical frameworks, it appears that there is a thread in Frankfurt School thought which points strongly toward gnosticism, *Daemonie* and the demiurge, an esoteric dimension which requires the help of *Doctor Faustus* to be sufficiently parsed out.

While the sections on film noir will emphasize the adaptation and migration of certain expressionist tropes and thematics into Hollywood cinema, the aim of this analysis is not, however, to trace a cinematic evolution from one genre into another across the great divide of the Atlantic ocean. While this cultural cross-pollination is certainly a frame through which to view the direct impact and influence of the German cultural elite on Hollywood cinema and vice-versa, I would also like to argue that this hybrid of Berlin/Los Angeles cultural production is central to the significance of the noir genre as a whole, at the level of filmic technique, but also at the level of cultural critique. It seems that a variety of expressionist attitudes toward modernity and the metropolis figure quiet prominently in the moral and aesthetic landscape of film noir, but not in a direct manner. Rather, noir’s antecedents survive as small clues and cinematic tricks that draw attention to themselves precisely insofar as they have become domesticated and “disenchanted” within the Hollywood machine. Film noir is a kind of cinema which takes the horrific power of the uncanny and the fantastic and injects it into a context, however exaggerated, of purified realism. This gesture generates what I have been calling a *mythic*

¹⁸⁰ Theodore Adorno. *Minima Moralia. Reflections from Damaged Life*. London: Verso, 1997.

¹⁸¹ Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1997.

realism, in which the contours of the rational world are saturated with a mythic intensity while refraining from violating the laws of a rationalist paradigm.

In the middle sections of this chapter, we will examine how noir gives cinematic expression to mythic realism, as well as how mythic realism has its own critical ethic of exposing the dark and sinister dimensions latent within the very structure of manicured transparency. As Dimendberg notes, “The metropolis portrayed in the film noir cycle seldom appears defamiliarized or re-enchanted, a space of genuinely enhanced freedom and possibility, but emerges instead as a highly rationalized and alienating system of exploitative drudgery permitting few possibilities of escape.”¹⁸² This rationalized world of noir, while excluding the supernatural, secularizes the horrific into criminal and anti-social elements, invoking a criminal underbelly of society whose hidden secret is often its indistinguishability from legitimate figures of wealth and power. Noir may also be the first genre to portray a world in which *corruption is the norm*, as well as the difficulties of moral and ethical behavior within such a universe—a topic which also appears to be at the center of the exile writings of the Frankfurt School in Los Angeles.

Theodor W. Adorno's scathing analysis of the psychic economy of bourgeois normativity, along with its connections to proto-fascist desiring structures, often emphasizes the deeper, unconscious registers associated with individual, and social, self-preservation in late capitalist society. Following the concept of self-sacrifice, as sketched out in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, he and Horkheimer trace how the social sphere of the bourgeois culture industry is characterized by the smallest gestures of submission and self-sacrifice to authority, in order for the individual to

¹⁸² Edward Dimendberg. *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004.

sustain himself in a world where private life has already fallen under the sway of economic calculus.¹⁸³ This dialectic of *self-sacrifice as self-preservation* is conceived broadly as the guiding logic of a matrix of social relations which atomizes individuals into systematic components of the production process (a division of labor which continues beyond the workplace into all arenas of social life). However, it appears that when self-sacrifice is tied up with aesthetic production (in order to make works of lasting cultural impact, i.e. a self-preservation beyond the grave), it may take on a new kind “barbaric” dimension, a process demonstrated in *Doctor Faustus*¹⁸⁴ by Thomas Mann, another German exile, taking refuge in Los Angeles during the war. Although the collaboration between Adorno and Mann on this work is said to primarily concern Adorno's tutelage of Mann in 12-tone music theory¹⁸⁵ (not to mention significant uncredited direct citation in the novel of Adorno's unpublished manuscript which eventually became *Philosophy of New Music*),¹⁸⁶ a musical approach cultivated by another exile, Arnold Schönberg, it is unmistakable that the dangers of cultural preservation and self-preservation within a society defined by the culture industry explored in the novel have deep resonances with a dialectic of sacrifice and cultural preservation central to Adorno and Horkheimer's work, a dialectic whose movements also demonstrate moments of when myth reasserts itself within the very epistemological structure of enlightened reason.

¹⁸³ Theodore Adorno. *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*. London: Verso, 1974.

¹⁸⁴ Thomas Mann. *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkühn as Told by a Friend*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992.

¹⁸⁵ James Schmidt. “Mephistopheles in Hollywood: Adorno, Mann, and Schoenberg.” *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*. ed. Tom Huhn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

¹⁸⁶ Theodore W. Adorno. *Philosophy of New Music*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.



Adorno, Mimesis and the Noir Aesthetics of Normal Corruption

As we move into a discussion of the work of the Frankfurt School, it is important to recognize a particular kind of ethical thinking that emerged within an exile community attempting to find footing, economically and culturally, in a completely foreign environment. From various historical accounts¹⁸⁷ of this ex-patriot community, it appears as though individuals of sometimes towering cultural stature were compelled to occupy the same social space as others with a similar standing in their respective fields. This concentration of cultural prowess, as well as ego, was unfortunately located within circumstances of scarcity: there were not enough positions and sources of employment and financial support to keep everyone in a state of economic comfort. The result of this, as is often the case with such situations of economic hardship, is to generate a competitive, distrustful environment, in which those whose interests are generally aligned may also be secretly working against each other. As Nico Israel discusses in his book *Outlandish: Written between Diaspora and Exile*, the exilic situation in Los Angeles was marked by such helpless disfigurement. “‘Every intellectual in emigration,’ he [Adorno] writes in an early aphorism ironically called ‘Protection, Help, and Counsel’ (*Schutz, Hilfe und Rat*—a title that in German carries the charge of a police-force motto), ‘is without exception mutilated [*beschaedigt*]’ ... ‘His language,’ Adorno continues, ‘has been expropriated, and the historical dimension that nourishes his knowledge, sapped’ ... The situation is exacerbated by the presence of factions within the diasporic emigre community; because ‘all emphases are wrong,

¹⁸⁷ See Martin Jay. *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*. London and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973; Erhard Bahr. *Weimar on the Pacific: German Exile Culture in Los Angeles and the Crisis of Modernism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007; Rolf Wiggershaus. *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995.

perspectives disrupted,' their attempts to organize politically seem futile. 'All this leaves no individual unmarked'...affecting every aspect of their existence."¹⁸⁸

Such an insular circle easily became a breeding ground for minor intrigue and gossip in addition to being a hotspot for some of the more important and unlikely collaborations in the 20th century German cultural sphere. Some of these figures were able to make their home here and find success while others struggled to find economic security. In this light, it may also be possible to see an economic dimension to the kinds of collaborations which availed themselves during this time, beyond a simple artistic or intellectual alignment. The melancholy of facing such an environment, as well as more or less depending on this environment for one's economic security, is made lucidly clear in many passages from Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, in which the very notion of sanctuary is interrogated and revealed to be no less corrupt than that which it attempts cordon off. As Adorno states: "As the professions of the middle-man lose their economic basis, the private lives of countless people are becoming those of agents and go-betweens; indeed the entire private domain is being engulfed by a mysterious activity that bears all the features of commercial life without their being actually any business to transact...and soon there is no relationship that is not seen as a 'connection,' no impulse not first censored as to whether it deviates from the acceptable...Not to be 'after' something is almost suspect..."¹⁸⁹ This sardonic description of a new economic reality, which has brought the private sphere into the service of economic circulation, is a phenomenon which is certainly not that much more avoidable within the intellectual and artistic milieu. This often meant that the friendships forged

¹⁸⁸ Nico Israel. *Outlandish: Writing Between Exile and Diaspora*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000. p.81

¹⁸⁹ Theodore Adorno. *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*. London: Verso, 1974. p.24

in this climate had to take into account the vicissitudes of the economy, even by those whose driving ethical and intellectual impulses were characterized by a resistance to all forms of instrumentalization and objectification.

In a way, this situation of desperation, although not felt at the level of safety and sheer survival, does characterize the position in which Adorno found himself in America, forced to rely on, as well as make his home in, that very culture he deeply criticized for its superficial uptake of the dictates of the capitalist system. This characterizes the kind of exilic writing in *Minima Moralia*, a work he, by and large, completed during his stay in West Los Angeles. Although Adorno may not have stated it explicitly, it appears that his analysis and judgment of social (mal) adaptations to the demands of the economic and social system were all the more apparent in their perniciousness because he was reliant upon his own adaptation to this world, to some degree, for his financial stability. It is clear from various accounts that Adorno's tenure was brief at the Princeton Radio Project because he was unable to bend to a less vitriolic critique of the medium he claimed to be responsible for desacralizing the great works of classical music (a concession required for the project to continue receiving its funding.)¹⁹⁰ While from a philosophical standpoint this may appear steadfast and admirable, from another vantage it seems that Adorno depended in a very serious way on the assistance and connections of his friends for employment and access to the American scene. However, this aspect of Adorno's personality and intellectual disposition, which appears to be so unrelenting and unbending, is also what made him particularly useful and of interest to others in his milieu. In the case of Horkheimer, who initially contemplated writing the book on dialectical logic (which later became *Dialectic of*

¹⁹⁰ Detlev Claussen. *Theodore W. Adorno: One Last Genius*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008.

Enlightenment) with Leo Lowenthal and even with Marcuse, but after reading Adorno's work on *The Philosophy of New Music*,¹⁹¹ he decided that Adorno was the one for the job. In other words, Adorno's "ruthless critique of everything existing" and his emphasis on the near inescapability from the triumph of rationalization were also the niche he developed that helped him professionally during this time.¹⁹²

Adorno's depictions of an intellectual desperation also have a geographical and architectural referent in the city of Los Angeles. As Nico Israel writes, in his *Outlandish: Writing Between Exile and Diaspora*, "What Adorno rather seeks to resist is the prefabricated, ready-made thought that could produce the concentration and death camps along with the single-family suburban house with garden. This kind of modern home is indeed uninhabitable."¹⁹³ *Minima Moralia* possesses "noir" features in its own right, which work to expose corruption and sickness within the very hubs of social and technological power, and the bad faith of an insulated civil society whose social graces to one another have become none other than a veneer masking the complete domination of social and psychic life by objective tendencies. In this manner, Adorno ruthlessly attacks the fetishes and the aesthetics of bourgeois security which manifest at the psychological, economical, interpersonal and even architectural levels of capitalist society. What is interesting about this, particularly in regard to architecture, is that the security apparatus, for the insulated population, tends also to be a screen for the projection of anxieties, anxieties which also emphasize a fear of contamination by the depraved behaviors and desires of a dangerous, yet

¹⁹¹ Theodore W. Adorno. *Philosophy of New Music*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

¹⁹² James Schmidt. "Mephistopheles in Hollywood: Adorno, Mann, and Schoenberg." *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*. ed. Tom Huhn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

¹⁹³ Nico Israel. *Outlandish: Writing Between Exile and Diaspora*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.

invisible underclass, a trope found constantly in noir fiction.¹⁹⁴ While Adorno does not contradict this characterization, he also emphasizes that the aesthetics of bourgeois security, viewed from a certain standpoint, will also convey damage, *Schaden*, or symptoms of an illness of the degradation of human subjectivity and its fusion with the brute mechanics of technocratic society. While this standpoint is essentially noir, it also is the result of witnessing the behavior and alignment of the masses in an increasingly totalitarian Germany. Although part of the Nazi ethos was a revulsion against the culture industry and its association with Judaism, Adorno demonstrates how this industry always, on the one hand, has had a fascist potential, and on the other hand, how the Nazi regime became itself through a fusion with the power of the cultural industry,¹⁹⁵ helping in fact to refine the scope of its power in Germany. *It could be said then that the putative project to reclaim German purity, as well as to glorify its artificially produced historical antecedents, could only be achieved by the very abdication of these German characteristics to the culture industry, a sacrifice in order to preserve them.*

By portraying a world in which all sides are corrupted, along with even those which attempt to escape or extricate themselves from corrupt entanglements, Adorno's pessimism shares an ethos with many works of film noir. Although Adorno's intellectual, critical distance from the extant world differs markedly on a superficial level from the themes of criminality and corruption narrativized in noir films (except for the important fact that this criticality was in no uncertain terms criminalized by the Nazi party once they took power and banned his book,

¹⁹⁴ This notion of "haunted infrastructure" or of infrastructure as a "depository for anxieties" in the context of Los Angeles will be a central problematic in Chapter 5.

¹⁹⁵ See Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1997. "The bourgeois whose existence is split into a business and private life, whose private life is split into keeping up his public image and intimacy, whose intimacy is split into the surly partnership of marriage and the bitter comfort of being quite alone...is already virtually a nazi..." (155)

forcing Adorno's hand to flee the country,)¹⁹⁶ this affinity between Adorno's negativity and the nascent social critique of film noir has deeper connections. As stated previously by Edward Dimendberg,¹⁹⁷ noir portrays a landscape of corruption and rationalization from which there is no clear escape, and that even the modes of attempting escape are themselves already corrupted. This portrait of the modern world is also to be found in Edgar Ulmer's *Detour*,¹⁹⁸ a noir film made by an Austrian ex-pat who also spent his share of time in the Berlin film industry. Paul Cantor's article on the parallels between Adorno and Ulmer¹⁹⁹ attempts to show just how much this film shares similar attitudes with the Frankfurt School, although it appears that none of the Frankfurt School members had any real contact with Ulmer. This essay then makes larger claims as to how European an "all-American" genre such film noir actually is. "The fear and anxiety characteristic of film noir may be a projection—projected by European directors onto an American landscape in which they understandably did not feel at home. Ulmer may have been right in a way he did not understand. Film noir is a kind of detour. In insisting on portraying the American landscape as a vast wasteland, it may tell us more about Europe than it does about the United States." (158) This characterization suggests that the actual fears informing the direction of many noir films come essentially from Europe (which he substantiates with a laundry list of

¹⁹⁶ Detlev Claussen. *Theodore W. Adorno: One Last Genius*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008.

¹⁹⁷ Edward Dimendberg. *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004.

¹⁹⁸ Although this film was considered of B-movie-quality because Ulmer's ostracization from the studio system due to an affair with the wife of Carl Laemmle's nephew (Laemmle was head of Universal at the time) denied him access to big budgets, it has nonetheless become a classic in the noir genre, with genre-thematics including: the inability to work both within the law as well as outside of it, the femme fatale, the exploitation and lack of proper recognition for talent, etc.

¹⁹⁹ Paul A. Cantor. "Film Noir and the Frankfurt School: America as Wasteland in Edgar Ulmer's *Detour*." *The Philosophy of Film Noir*. ed. Mark Conrad. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006.

European film noir directors.) While this portrayal of America may on the one hand be seen as a reaction by various European immigrants to an unfamiliar environment and culture, whose logic was difficult to decipher, it may be that the European *Weltanschauung* also brought with it a more “daemonic” tinge that sought to find mythic archetypes within quintessentially American scenarios. This is part of reason why I believe noir falls within the scope of what I have been calling “mythic realism” (which can be described as a style in which the contours of the rational world are saturated with a mythic intensity while refraining from violating the laws of a rationalist paradigm.)

In *Detour*,²⁰⁰ the main character is forced to play jazz standards on the piano to entertain restaurant patrons even though he is classically-trained and has ambitions to succeed in this realm of high art. When he tries to escape this world on the east coast by hitching his way across the country to Hollywood to meet his girlfriend, a strange set of circumstances undermine his wholesome plans, preventing him from even trying his luck in Los Angeles. Although he is not a criminal from the outset, *he begins to act like one in order to avoid actually being suspected as one*, indicating that if he attempts to be a good citizen and report the strange death of the man who picked him up hitchhiking, he will most certainly be accused of murdering the man, whereas if he steals the man’s wallet, clothes and automobile and pretends to be him, he will be treated as normal and upstanding. However, because he is compelled to take the criminal route to “play it safe,” fate throws an unlikely surprise in his way, forcing him to break even more laws against his will in order to eventually reach freedom in Los Angeles (a freedom which likely would be hard to distinguish from the limited life he led on the east coast, as his girlfriend

²⁰⁰ *Detour*. Dir. Edgar G. Ulmer. Producer’s Releasing Corporation, 1945, film.

already was turned down for singing roles in the “pictures”.) By the end of the film, it becomes apparent that the main character will have no other options in life other than being a criminal or a dissatisfied entertainer with unfulfilled artistic ambitions. This logic demonstrates the straight jacket of rationalization and instrumentalization as even present within the attempt to escape it, and possibly more importantly, that the only imaginable escape is for one to “mimic” the constructions of this rationalization. By acting how a criminal would, he at least is initially able to avoid detection by the authorities.

However, it is precisely this mimicry of objective conditions, or in this case, of criminality, which leads the protagonist into the fateful hands of a manipulative femme fatale, who he eventually accidentally murders—another instance of bad luck that at this juncture can only be construed as unlucky fate. By mimicking a criminal in order to avoid being mistaken for one, he becomes caught in another more fateful trap that does not appear to have an end, as she continues to force him to commit more crimes by threatening to turn him in. For the purposes of this analysis, it is important to note how, on the one hand, the only potential “way out” of a devastatingly unlucky situation for the main character is by pretending to be a criminal, and on the other, that this mimicry conjures another order of danger potentially more threatening than the criminal justice system: namely, the dangers of a mythic fateful inevitability that follows him doggedly. In other words, by attempting to make himself indistinguishable from objective norms in rationalized society, he somehow conjures up a mythical universe that parts ways with such a society. While this “way out” may temporarily thwart his detection by authorities, it makes him vulnerable to other kinds of unexpected dangers.

Another classic noir thematic which dove-tails with this modality of fraudulent mimicry concerns the double-identity of the domain of legitimate power and the so-called “underworld” of criminals. In either sphere, if one tries to escape, say, from the underworld to the ground of law-abiding civil society, one will invariably find oneself still under the power of the same enemy (an enemy who secretly controls both spheres), meaning quite simply that there is “no outside” or in Adornian speak, “the wrong life cannot be lived rightly” and “the whole is the false.” These famous quotes from *Minima Moralia* flatly critique the very status of ethics and truth in such a corrupt society as an impossibility, like a spaceship trying to fly straight through curved space. This noir logic works on both sides of the moral spectrum in that one’s attempts at righteousness may often lead one into criminality or at least into moral ambiguity, and on other hand, that working as a criminal may often mean working for a boss who actually appears to be socially prominent and upstanding in civil society (a trope with a clear expressionist lineage going back such diabolical figures as Dr. Mabuse and Dr. Caligari who hold power in both the underworld and in civil society).

In Fritz Lang’s *The Big Heat*²⁰¹ this logic is clearly formulated by the Detective Sergeant Dave Bannion when he enters the mansion of a wealthy mogul who also happens to be the arch-criminal who, among other things, ordered the bombing of his car, which killed Bannion’s wife. He condemns the crime boss for his immaculate household, which appears without any blemish or stain whatsoever. However, it is made clear that this space of hygienic wealth marred by no dark and dirty corners is also only possible at the expense of the corruption of the world surrounding it, and that really the world of grift, crime, and moral turpitude is one and the same

²⁰¹ *The Big Heat*. Dir. Fritz Lang. Columbia Pictures, 1953, film.

as the one of so-called legitimate wealth accumulation—a dynamic resembling a möbius-strip. The dialectical others of the wealthy, prominent members of society turn out to be their accomplices in the maintaining of their positions. Within the genre of noir, we see the earlier attempts in popular media to make a larger statement against the totality of the capitalist system. Beginning with a critique of corruption, in which it appears necessary to excise and reform the damaged parts of the system, it soon becomes clear that corruption is actually the norm, which entails that the entire system functions upon foundations that go against its stated codes and morality.

This kind of diagnosis of “total corruption” is clearly articulated in Adorno’s *Minima Moralia* in aphorisms such as “The Health unto Death”²⁰² in which he attempts to demonstrate how social adaptations which represent “normality” are really symptoms of a larger degenerative condition plaguing the relations between individuals and their own internal lives. In the process, he also attacks the discourse and practice of psychoanalysis, which he claims had by that time morphed into a tool of the “establishment” which also recognized and confirmed the righteousness of certain psychic “deformities” in late capitalist society. Adorno explains:

“The libidinal achievements demanded of an individual behaving as healthy in body and mind, are such as can be performed only at the cost of the profoundest mutilation, of internalized castration in extroverts, beside which the old renunciation of identification with the father is child’s play as which it was first rehearsed. The regular guy, the popular girl, have to repress not only their desires and insights, but even the symptoms that in bourgeois times resulted from repression. Just as the old injustice is not changed by a lavish display of light, air and hygiene, but is in fact concealed by the gleaming transparency of rationalized big business, the inner health of our time has been secured by blocking flight into illness without in the slightest altering its aetiology. The

²⁰² Theodore Adorno. *Minima Moralia. Reflections from Damaged Life*. London: Verso, 1997.

dark closets have been abolished as a troublesome waste of space, and incorporated in the bathroom. What psycho-analysis suspected, before it became itself a part of hygiene, has been confirmed. The brightest rooms are secret domain of faeces.” (58)

From a quick glance, it is clear just how much Adorno was allergic to a kind of American extrovertism, as he so famously derided as “internalized castration.” This meant, of course, that the internal universe of the “regular guy, the popular girl” had no virility whatsoever, but nonetheless this behavior was applauded and encouraged by the social environment. In regards to social and mental health, the capitalist system and its wing of psychotherapeutic technicians have only helped to discourage the appearance of symptoms of maladaptation without properly examining the source of these ailments. A key dynamic described in this aphorism is the *repression of the signs of repression* in that one must hide the fallout of libidinal exertions which are used to adjust the individual to the performance and expectation pressures of his or her environment. Nervous ticks and eruptions of unintended behaviors are a problem not because they display an underlying need that remains unfulfilled by social life or because the pressures of conforming to the demands of a various “life-situations” are too great; rather, the instances of maladaptation are problematic because there is an overall injunction against their appearance in capitalist society, *a taboo*.

In place of these abnormalities, however, is a range of behaviors which Adorno summarily dubs as the “sickness of the healthy.”

No science has yet explored the inferno in which were forged the deformations that later emerge to daylight as cheerfulness, openness, sociability, successful adaption to the inevitable, an equable, practical frame of mind...The only objective way of diagnosing the sickness of the healthy is by the incongruity between their rational existence and possible course their lives might been given by reason. All the same the traces of illness give them away: their skin seems covered by a rash

printed in regular patterns, like a camouflage of the inorganic. The very people who burst with proofs of exuberant vitality could easily be taken for prepared corpses, from whom the news of their not-quite-successful decease has been withheld for reasons of population policy. Underlying the prevalent health is death. (59)

While the overall message is clear, namely that being socially well-adjusted is more or less a death sentence for the vital forces of the individual, these passages have another content which emerges at the metaphorical level. This content can be summarized as the influence or penetration of the inorganic into the realm of the living. Individuals are called by the system to assume the inert characteristics of various models of normal sociability and to voluntarily mimic norms, such that they appear in a “camouflage of the inorganic.” If we look at the German original it appears that mimicry in nature is much more clearly referred to (“...sie sehen aus, als wäre ihre Haut mit einem regelmäßig gemusterten Ausschlag bedruckt, als trieben sie Mimikry mit dem Anorganischen.”)²⁰³ The topic of mimicry in nature and its continuation within the human species will also return later in this chapter with a discussion on Thomas Mann, but for now it is important to point out the overall dynamic which Adorno describes. Normality and health in this society entail a mimicry of the lifeless, a mimicry which also appears to be essential for one’s survival in the overall economy. This is also, of course, the typical explanation behind mimicry in nature: as a defense against predators, the living attempt to appear non-living in order to avoid death (the mimicry of death in order to stay alive, or more to the point, a sacrifice in order to preserve oneself.)

However, not everyone agrees with this explanation of mimicry in the natural world.

According to Roger Caillois, there are a variety of phenomena which refute the simple survival

²⁰³ Theodore W. Adorno. *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben*. No copyright, 2002, textz.com.

explanation of mimicry. “There are other reasons more immediate, and at the same time less to be suspected of sophistry, that keep mimicry from being taken for a defense reaction. First of all, it would only apply to carnivores that hunt by sight and not by smell as is often the case. Carnivores, moreover, do not generally bother with motionless prey: immobility would thus be a better defense, and indeed insects are exceedingly prone to employ a false corpseslike rigidity.”²⁰⁴ This, along with other facts including the presence of mimicking insects found within the stomachs of predators, compels Caillois to posit that mimicry, far from being a biological necessity, is rather, more likely, a *luxury*. This concept of luxury also clearly places him within the surrealist orbit of Georges Bataille and his theories of general economy²⁰⁵ (the two were founding members the Acephale Group and fronted the College de Sociologie whose lectures were also quietly attended by Walter Benjamin)²⁰⁶ that were based on analyzing the economic behavior of civilizations through their instances of useless expenditure. But what is perhaps most intriguing about the interpretative direction that Caillois takes is in his discussion of magic.

This tendency, whose universality thus becomes difficult to deny, may have been the determining force responsible for the present morphology of mimetic insects, at a time when their organisms were more plastic than they are today, as one must suppose in any case given the fact of transformation. Mimicry would thus be accurately defined as an *incantation fixed at its culminating point* and having caught the sorcerer in his own trap. No one should say it is nonsense to attribute magic to insects: the fresh application of the words ought not to hide the profound simplicity of the thing.²⁰⁷ (27)

²⁰⁴ Roger Caillois. “Mimicry and Legendary Psychesthesia”. *October*, Vol.13 (Winter, 1984), p. 23

²⁰⁵ See Georges Bataille. *The Accursed Share: Volume I*.

²⁰⁶ Anson Rabinbach. "Outwitting the Historical Dynamic: Mimesis and the Construction of Antisemitism in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*." Transformations: CSST Working Paper #120, Ann Arbor, 1996.

²⁰⁷ Roger Caillois. “Mimicry and Legendary Psychesthesia”. *October*, Vol.13 (Winter, 1984), pp.16-32.

While this insect interlude may appear initially out of place in a discussion of social alienation (unless we are thinking about Kafka), it does take on a different light when we look at Adorno's major contributions to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in which the use of magic in primitive culture is examined as a form of domination, an instance of fraudulence and also as modality of sacrifice in order to preserve oneself. It is also confirmed that Adorno himself was quite impressed with the French anthropologist's writings on mimicry, and reviewed one of his articles in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*.²⁰⁸

This phenomenon of mimicking the inorganic has for Adorno quite a large reach, and really may be considered one of the most important tributaries of thought for *Minima Moralia*—a tendency which can be summed up as the increasing objectification of life in mass society, in which more and more aspects of everyday life undergo a process of mechanization. However, this feature of domination appears in a different light when seen as an attempt to master one's situatedness and *Geworfenheit* by submitting to it. Does the insect which assumes the shape of a leaf do so to protect itself against predation or rather to possibly to master its environment by becoming indistinguishable from it? In some of his other writings, especially in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno examines the magical roots of such behavior, in which the shaman, within a particular space that is cordoned off from the non-magical, will allow himself to merge with and mimic natural processes. However, while this is the modality that appears to protect the community, it is also the very mode through which domination of the many by the few is exerted. The sickness which Adorno describes in this aphorism is one which is characterized by mimicry of the objective world, but instead of this mimicry being the attempt to master one's

²⁰⁸ Anson Rabinbach. "Outwitting the Historical Dynamic: Mimesis and the Construction of Antisemitism in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*." Transformations: CSST Working Paper #120, Ann Arbor, 1996.

environment (and as the root of the aura of the work of art, a dynamic explored in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*), it seems to be none other than a mechanism of the culture industry in its penetration into private life, which only serves to produce the aesthetic equivalent of industrial products.

From various biographical accounts of the writing process of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,²⁰⁹ it appears that each author can be attributed quite clearly with particular chapters²¹⁰ (excluding the first chapter, which was apparently assembled from notes taken by Gretel Adorno on a conversation between the two philosophers at the Adornos, which may also perhaps explain, beyond all attempts to produce an “unreifiable” language, why this chapter is so turgidly written.)²¹¹ The sections which seem to have more of Adorno’s stamp are the ones on Odysseus and on the culture industry, which carry a common thread in that the signature bourgeois gesture of domination begins with self-objectification. At the end of chapter 2, which unpacks various instances of Odysseusian cunning, the authors discuss the tale of Odysseus and his encounter with the Sirens. While Odysseusian cunning always follows a logic of submission to the repetitive patterns of each mythic being in order to liberate himself from their power, this last instance is of particular significance in relation to the realm of aesthetic production and the overall function of art in bourgeois society. In this story, Odysseus submits himself to the haunting power of the Siren’s song by tying himself to mast of his ship, a position from which he

²⁰⁹ Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1997.

²¹⁰ Anson Rabinbach. "Outwitting the Historical Dynamic: Mimesis and the Construction of Antisemitism in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*." Transformations: CSST Working Paper #120, Ann Arbor, 1996.

²¹¹ Juergen Habermas. "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Re-Reading the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*." *The Frankfurt School: Critical Assessments*. ed. Jay Bernstein. New York: Routledge, 1994.

will hear everything, but is incapable of any kind of action, thereby preserving himself from being taken by the Sirens. His crew, however, is ordered to stuff wax into their ears, to prevent them from hearing the Siren's song, which allows them row unimpeded into dangerous waters. Here, there is a clear division of labor: while the working crew is protected from dangerous temptation, channeling all direct risk onto the (capitalist) figure of Odysseus, the boss, the crew is all directly prohibited access to the deeper powers of the aesthetic world. Odysseus experiences the Siren's song not as an art-form, but rather as a force of nature, an experience which allows him to emerge enriched with a newfound artistic faculty; although, all aesthetic works henceforth produced within civilized territory are condemned to remain disfigured approximations of Odysseus's experience.

However, by restricting his own capacity for motion, by making himself appear inert like his ship, yet remaining completely aware of his experiences, he not only survives the event, but also emerges victorious.

The Sirens have their own quality, but in primitive bourgeois history, it is neutralized to become merely the wistful longing of the passer-by. The epic says nothing of what happened to the Sirens once the ship had disappeared. In tragedy, however, it would have been their last hour, as it was for the Sphinx when Oedipus solved the riddle, fulfilling its command and thus disenchanting it. For the right of the mythic figures, being that of the stronger, depends only on the impossibility of fulfilling their statutes. If they are satisfied, the myths right down to their most distant relation will suffer for it. Since Odysseus' successful-unsuccessful encounter with the Sirens all songs have been affected, and Western music as a whole suffers from the contradiction of song in civilization—song which nevertheless proclaims the emotional power of all art in music.²¹²

²¹² Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1997. p.60

Here, Adorno shows that fulfilling the impossible demands of mythic figures is the key not only to Odysseus's survival, but also to the invalidation of the mythic order. *Disenchantment occurs through a quasi-magical act in which, the human subject allows himself to become indistinguishable from natural forces while simultaneously preserving his rational faculty.* As Adorno says, "Only consciously contrived adaptation to nature brings nature under the control of the physically weaker. The *ratio* which supplants mimesis is not simply its counterpart. It is itself mimesis: mimesis unto death. The subjective spirit which cancels the animation of nature can master a despiritualized nature only by imitating its rigidity and despiritualizing itself in turn." (57) This passage clearly identifies the mimesis of nature's rigidity, its inert objectivity (an objectivity which is already the result of the de-animation of nature), to be the modality used to disenchant it, a disenchantment which also "despiritualizes" the human subject in the process. In other words the moment of disenchantment occurs through the mimicry of the mythical, which creates an objective replica of the mythic agency. This objectification is also responsible for the eventual exchangeability of various (mythic) qualities which previously ruled unequivocally in their own domains. However, in our speculation on instances of re-enchantment, or rather, the *disenchantment of disenchantment* (a property of enlightened progress and reflexive modernization) an emergence of mimicry would also logically follow; however, it would be *a mimicry without a distinct natural or mythical object, and rather an object composed out of scientific rationalization, as an entity whose boundaries are drawn by statistical truths.* This use of the mimetic faculty somehow works to (re)enchant the matter at hand, rather than having the effect of disenchantment.

Mimesis in its earlier instantiations did not aim to turn nature into an object; rather nature's own sovereign power was still acknowledged and respected. "While this action is manipulative, it still acknowledges nature as an independent object beyond human control. Furthermore, nature is not made into an object of knowledge, but is identified with; the magician does not believe he has the power to control nature, but instead attempts to become part of the same order from which the threat emanates." (35) This mimesis lacks the additional elements of rationality which attempt to dominate nature, and while it may represent a "prehistoric" approach to influencing and manipulating one's environment, it remains, according to Adorno, secretly present within mythology and later in metaphysics. The traces of primitive mimesis survive as involuntary responses within the body that may periodically appear in spite of all attempts by the individual to keep them at bay.

They produce moments of biological prehistory: danger signs which make the hair stand on end and the heart stop beating. In idiosyncrasy, individual organs escape from the control of the subject, and independently obey fundamental biological stimuli. The ego which experiences such reactions—for instance, cutaneous or muscle torpor, or stiffness of joints—is not wholly in control of itself. For a few moments these reactions effect an adaptation to circumambient, motionless nature. But as the animate approaches the inanimate, and the more highly-developed form of life comes closer to nature, it is alienated from it, since inanimate nature, which life in its most vigorous form aspires to become, is capable only of wholly external, spatial relationships. Space is absolute alienation. When men try to become like nature, they harden themselves against it. Protection as fear is a form of mimicry. The reflexes of stiffening and numbness are archaic schemata of the urge to survive: by adaptation to death, life pays the toll of its continued existence. (180)

This passage begins by addressing the failure of the ego to subsume all drives and even to control all organs within the individual.²¹³ While this sounds like a description of a neuroaesthetic who has temporarily lost the ability to control a body part or who feels as if part of his body has been taken over, it is also explicitly referred to here as a resurgence of biological prehistory. Thus, the failure of the modern ego in the capitalist system is associated with an illness that recycles the uncanny emergence of (pre)historical gesture, and a corresponding confrontation with oneself as other. In this case, the illness has a historical content, but it is one of repressed history. The end of this passage is also interesting because it describes a “hardening” process in which humans attempt to become inert like the objective world, but also appear to protect themselves against this full absorption by that same hardening. This means that the alienation is even present within the vigorous act to erase the distance from the objective world and to become immobile; the vital organism confirms its vitality in the very act of *becoming* inert.

However, the cumulative response by the civilized attitude, when coming across such instances in which the ego cannot subsume all organic impulses, generally arouses “disgust.” Everything that carries the taint of decay, of impulses which have not been mastered for purposive ends, all of this accumulates into an abject reservoir of society that, as Adorno states in “The Health unto Death,” has an injunction against appearing. This is because civilization has worked to administer mimetic behavior and impulses to the point where “[u]ncontrolled mimesis is outlawed.” (180) But what exactly is meant by this phrase uncontrolled mimesis? And what would such behavior look like? While we do not receive a direct answer for this by Adorno and Horkheimer, it seems that this is where they take recourse to Freud and his notion of the

²¹³ See the aphorism “Plurale Tantum.” Theodore Adorno. *Minima Moralia. Reflections from Damaged Life*. London: Verso, 1997. p.45

“uncanny.” “Those blinded by civilization experience their own tabooed mimetic features only in certain gestures and behavior patterns which they encounter in others and which strike them as isolated remnants, as embarrassing rudimentary elements that survive in the rationalized environment. ‘What seems repellently alien is in fact all too familiar: the infectious gestures of direct contacts suppressed by civilization, for instance, touch, soothing, snuggling up, coaxing.’” (182) These behaviors are *unheimlich* because they chafe against the models of behavior molded by rationalization, appearing as if from another age altogether, and yet they are also deeply familiar at the level of the species and phylogenetic transmission. This discussion also corresponds to the notion of a biological uncanny referred to in chapter 2, in which biological patterns, features, illnesses and behaviors from a bygone age return with a vengeance and upset normative behavioral modes of modern life. We also can see such an eruption of a biological uncanny with Malte²¹⁴ (although for him the odd experiences he endures correspond more to his own ontogenetic development, and less to a phylogenetic one) in that his present discomfort and alienation seems to stem from what he describes as the return of a childhood illness, and of nervous ticks and shameful behavior that he no longer can manage to control.

Thus, we have two different kinds of re-enchantment at work here: one is the resurgence of repressed characteristics from a bygone era that can be described as a “biological uncanny,” and the second occurs as the result of the attempt to mimic the products of rationalization. The first instance represents a moment of the failure of repression inherent within the machinations of the dominant paradigm, or an excess of primitive mimesis, while the second represents the suspension of the dominant scientific paradigm through the application to itself of the mimetic

²¹⁴ Rainer Maria Rilke. *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

modality that originally gave birth to it. Both of these registers can be seen in Adorno's aphorism in that the signs of repression take on an uncanny status, while the "health unto death" is result of mimicking objective tendencies. As Adorno says, "All the movements of health resemble the reflex-movements of beings whose hearts have stopped beating. Scarcely ever does an unhappily furrowed brow, bearing witness to terrible and long-forgotten exertions, or a moment of pathetic stupidity disrupting smooth logic, or an awkward gesture, embarrassingly preserve a trace of vanished life."²¹⁵ Adorno's description of eruptions of unintended outbursts and awkward movements portrays them as a last refuge for a kind of disappearing vitality; however, another look at resurgences of "vanished life" shows them to be quite similar to the symptoms of nervous disorders, as tics and automatisms which temporarily assume control of the individual. Thus, it is important to interrogate Adorno's distinction between the "reflex-movements" which characterize "healthy" humans as automatons, and these other "idiosyncratic" movements which carry in them the lost histories of rich subjective innervations and vital interiority. In both cases, there is a suspension of control over one's actions, but in one version we have an uncanny resurgence of unregimented vitality, while in the other we have sheer automatism that has not yet "recognized" its purposelessness. Even though at the end of this aphorism Adorno states that the sickness of the healthy in no way presupposes the healthiness of the sick, here he does seem to see traces of health and vitality in nervous movement. *This is where undecidability between the mimicry of rationalized forms and the resurgence of a mimetic capacity becomes a figure to see historical adaptivity to different regimes of normality and truth. This is also why undecidable illness is also uncanny in itself.*

²¹⁵ Theodore Adorno. *Minima Moralia. Reflections from Damaged Life*. London: Verso, 1997. p. 59

The last chapter in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, “Elements of Anti-Semitism,” discusses instances when a “false mimesis” emerges and attempts to make its environment conform to itself. In their words, “Anti-Semitism is a deeply imprinted schema, a ritual of civilization; the pogroms are the true ritual murders. They demonstrate the impotence of sense, significance and ultimately of truth—which might hold them within bounds.”²¹⁶ Anti-Semitism is for them the emergence of a repressed mimesis, which rather than imitating the environment, tries to make it conform to its own image.

Anti-Semitism is based on a false projection. It is the counterpart of true mimesis, and fundamentally related to the repressed form; in fact, it is probably the morbid expression of repressed mimesis. Mimesis imitates the environment, but false projection makes the environment like itself. For mimesis the outside world is the model which the inner world must try to conform to: the alien must become familiar; but false projection confuses the inner and outer world and defines the most intimate experiences as hostile. Impulses which the subject will not admit as his own even though they are most assuredly so, are attributed to the object—the prospective victim. The actual paranoiac has no choice but to obey the laws of his sickness. But in Fascism this behavior is made political; the object of this illness is deemed true to reality; and the mad system becomes the reasonable norm in the world and deviation from it a neurosis. (187)

This psychoanalytic explanation of fascism which entails that a paranoiac sickness has been politicized is also verified by other historical accounts of Nazi anti-Semitism, in particular Jeffrey Herf. According to Herf,²¹⁷ the Jewish conspiracy, so often invoked as a means of rallying the German people, was not simply a fantastic construction used for political and strategic purposes. Rather, various accounts indicate that top-ranking Nazis, including Hitler

²¹⁶ Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1997. p. 171

²¹⁷ Jeffrey Herf. *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda during World War II and the Holocaust*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006.

himself, firmly believed in the existence of this overarching global conspiracy. While Hitler is said to have equated himself with Pasteur and Koch in finding the so-called source of the degenerative disease of the 20th century in the Jew, it appears from other accounts that this statement is not simply an instance of mass manipulation, but rather, he believed maniacally in a degenerative conspiracy.

Thus, in a certain sense, the fear of such a degenerative social illness is not simply the fear of its effects on the individual and his or her eventual degeneration; there is, however, also the fear of its magical powers, as if the perceptions engendered by it were themselves not only the symptoms of something contagious, but as if they could themselves spread the sickness. In this sense, a disease whose cause was ideas could also spread through the dissemination of ideas. This is the dual aspect of Hitler's exhibition on degenerate art, for example. The exhibition demonstrates how degeneration and disease are present within and the cause of "twisted" artistic perception and expression, but also that these concretizations of artistic "deformity" must be destroyed because the images themselves have an infectious quality. While it seems contradictory to show the population the very thing that they should be protected from by destroying it, it also seemed important to educate the population to see with anti-semitic vision, teaching them a mode of seeing which initially recognizes the so-called signs of degeneracy, and then fabricates a host of other images which act as the "signified" for the term degeneracy. Or as Adorno and Horkheimer make clear, anti-Semitism also essentially rallies around the moment of forbidden mimicry when the leader mimics the Jew, as this moment provides the desired release of energies otherwise repressed in modern society.



Mythic Realism and Statistical Truth in Billy Wilder's Double Indemnity

This next section will address the thematics of mimicry, fraudulence and statistical truth in one of the foundational works of the film noir genre, *Double Indemnity*.²¹⁸ What Adorno's analysis points to (described at length in the last section) is the phylogenetic history of mimesis within the human species and how this mimetic faculty expresses itself within the episteme of various historical epochs. While this mimetic faculty is primarily associated with moments of disenchantment, or the demystification of animism in nature and myth, it appears to generate quite different phenomena when the object of mimicry is not mystical or mythical, but rather, the product of objectification and rationalization. The film *Double Indemnity* narrates how the criminal plot devised by two lovers to create a "fictional scenario" (alongside the perpetration of an actual murder) that adheres to the logic and standards of a rationalized world, defined in this case by insurance statistics, actually leads to an emergence of irrational processes. This means that mimicry of the objective-rational may rather act as a *disenchantment of disenchantment* that somehow causes the injunction against the mythical and the irrational to disappear, leading the characters to feel as if they are caught within the fateful trap of a mythic power.

Noir cinema preserve attributes of expressionist cinema by recapitulating the uncanny transfer of the spectral apparition of the part-human, part-natural, part-demonic villain into the rational sphere of the bourgeois, but in a more "domesticated" manner. In film noir, this conflict often appears in apocalyptic fashion (in the etymological sense of a "revelation") by showing the traces of criminality, pathology and immorality within the very spaces of wealth, hygiene and

²¹⁸ *Double Indemnity*. Dir. Billy Wilder. Paramount Pictures, 1944. Film.

normativity that are supposed to be free of maladies. Noir tends to demonstrate that these spaces are usually allowed to remain “untainted” only at the cost of their surrounding environments, which become corrupted under their control. Thus, the criminal and depraved is actually the repressed kernel of truth within bourgeois social and economic relations. Expressionist horror, however, tends to focus on a particular individual who has superhuman traits that may be also ancestral in nature, stemming from a particular genetic stock. This emphasizes the uniqueness of the criminal and explains his ability to stand beyond the likes of other men. This figure of the criminal draws not only the disgust, but also the fascination of the masses, precisely because he is not subject to the same kind of emasculation by the bourgeois world. In film noir, the criminal has become everyday and quotidian in two senses: one, as the average everyman who wants to remove himself from drudgery and an array of immutable social conditions (even though this society prides itself on the capacity for upward social mobility), and two, as the powerful and upstanding figures in society, whose dirty dealings are hidden by the polished exterior of unlawfully-acquired wealth.

The noir genre also marks a shift in the way that horror was packaged as a genre, a shift that appeared around the time Billy Wilder’s *Double Indemnity* was released. Horror was previously associated more directly with the domain of gothic fantasy, in which the supernatural and otherworldly provided the source of terror, but Wilder’s film was billed as horror, yet also praised for its scathing realism, an apparent contradiction that served to expand the meaning of the genre. In the early 40’s, Wilder and other German ex-pat filmmakers were often automatically identified as expressionist directors who produced masterpieces in gothic horror, even though many of them had little connection to the genre. Because of the fact that

expressionist cinema had attained an international notoriety during the Weimar period, it was an immediate association, however untrue, which brought a cachet of value to these Weimar transplants, trying to make their way into the Hollywood studio system. As Mark Jancovich explains in his *Realistic Horror: Film Noir and 1940's Horror Cycle*,²¹⁹ “This association between German directors and horror may explain why German directors such as Wilder, Lang, and Siodmak were quickly put to work on horror productions as the 1940's horror cycle begin to pick up momentum after the success of *Cat People* (1942), even though many of the German directors had little or no association with expressionism prior to their arrival in America. As Koepnick points out, ‘when considering the ways in which exiled film workers may have imported Weimar sensibilities to Hollywood, acts of performative repetition and unforeseen redress clearly outnumbered instances of direct transfer.’” (57) Not only did directors such as Wilder have little to do with expressionism, their new designation as German horror directors altered both the way their cinematic history was interpreted across the Atlantic and how their work produced in Hollywood was classified. Jancovich goes on to explain that when *Double Indemnity* came out, it was considered to be horror because, for one, the difference between thriller and horror had not yet been established, and secondly, because of this gothic stereotype attributed to German directors.

While some German ex-pat film-makers do have a clear relationship to expressionist cinema, or may be have been themselves innovators in the genre like Lang, it is interesting to see that the emergence of the genre that became known as noir was initially described as horror in light of its integration of a gothic european element. The stakes of this genre-straddling may also

²¹⁹ Marc Jancovich. “Realistic Horror: Film Noir and 1940's Horror Cycle.” *Billy Wilder, Movie-Maker: Critical Essays on the Films*. Jefferson: Macfarland and Company, 2011.

be registered in the content of noir films. Film noir films often deploy an array of cinematic techniques to convey the crooked and the sinister, including the likes of stark juxtaposition in lighting and the use of shadow to mark off different kinds of spatialities, and their corresponding moral spheres. For example in *Double Indemnity*,²²⁰ the famous use of venetian blinds for lighting the interior of the Dietrichson house created a quasi-ominous atmosphere in which morally ambiguous behavior could ensue. This use of light and shadow for the interior shots must be juxtaposed against the exterior shots of the house, in which this spanish-style villa is flawlessly bathed in rays of sunlight in the crests of the Hollywood hills. However, noir's depiction of dark, 'anti-social' elements, lurking beneath the surface of bourgeois civil society, do not take on an otherworldly status. They are not an uncanny enemy who visits destruction upon the civilized world from the margins of rationality. Rather, noir's portrayal of *Feindlichkeit* fits squarely into the parameters of realism, in which the venal and criminal do not originate from nebulous dark forces, but from directly within the civilized system as a criminal underclass, or in many cases, from the heart of civilized wealth and power. In this regard, it is important to examine noir as a peculiar hybrid, which is composed, on the one hand, of Hollywood's interpretation of the Berlin film industry, and on the other, of the German film-maker's interpretation of Hollywood. In this manner, noir is quite the Berlin/Los Angeles synthesis that cannot really be reduced to either pole. However, enjoying its position of slight remove, it could levy hefty critiques against both sides of the divide. What these films illustrate is a rich field of narrative which explores insecurities around the glitches and disruptions in modernity's dream.

²²⁰ *Double Indemnity*. Dir. Billy Wilder. Paramount Pictures, 1944. Film.

The 1944 film *Double Indemnity*, directed by Billy Wilder, explores the issue of fraudulence in world dominated by statistics, probabilities and percentages. From the outset of the film, the main character, Walter Neff, whose job is an insurance salesman, must deal in “risk value” when selling insurance policies to new clients, assessing the likelihood of them needing to cash in on claims, as well as portraying modern dangers to them in vivid scenarios. This job, which requires the story-telling slickness of the salesman and the cunning of a con-man, is juxtaposed at the against the job of claims adjuster, a position occupied in Neff’s firm by Barton Keyes. These two jobs form the two basic branches of the private insurance industry: the one being tied to expansion of profit and company growth within the field of competitors by selling more insurance through defining and illustrating new risks, and the other, while also having the economic viability of the insurance company as its highest aim, being something much closer to a synthesis of investigative police work, the work of a lawyer making a case, and the number-crunching research of a social scientist. It is interesting that one of these jobs, that of claims adjuster, does not in itself generate revenue; rather, it concerns itself with another kind of value: the correct valuation of calamity and misfortune, and the investigation of its factual existence.

The work of a claims adjuster appears to be two-fold. In both cases, he must determine truth, but in two markedly different senses. In the first case, he must determine factual truth, which entails the gathering of all available evidence, verified at least superficially in its veracity, into a cohesive story or picture in which no part of the evidence contradicts that of another part. In the second case, the adjuster must also determine what can be called “statistical truth,” which refers to the likelihood or probability of a factual event’s existence. In this second truth, the adjuster will have to take his case to task, cross-examining it against a litany of statistical

statements in order to determine its chances of being true. In this second sense the adjuster must reconcile the existence of two worlds, each possessing its own truth value, against each other. While the claim to factual truth may in the end triumph over the statistical (in a court of law), there is nonetheless no doubt that the processing of every individual case is heavily influenced by its statistical profile and how its details gel against the curves of a larger statistical picture. Cases which exhibit strong deviations from the warp and woof of the norm are called upon to procure such an assailable litany of evidence as to be considered true beyond reproach.

In the film, a dynamic interplay between these two regimes of truth is underscored in Keyes' investigation of a case of insurance fraud in which Neff partners up with Phyllis Dietrichson to murder her husband in order to collect on his accident insurance policy which they have secretly taken out under his name. This policy also has a double indemnity clause that guarantees double the payout if the policy-holder dies from an accident on a train, a clause which Neff takes advantage of when they plan the murder, which makes it appear as if Dietrichson is killed by falling off the rear observation-car. Keyes initially examines all the angles of the factual case, determining the veracity of alibies and the like. In this sphere of truth the scheme seems to work, as if the characters just might get away with selling their counterfeit event as a reality. However, what causes Keyes to probe deeper, reacting to a heavy feeling in his stomach, after being otherwise convinced of the case's factuality, is its stark improbability. Here I quote from Cain's novella,²²¹

While you were learning how to pull bow oars there, I was studying these tables. Take a look them. Here's suicide by race, by color, by occupation, by sex, by locality, by seasons of the year, by time of day when committed. Here's suicide by method of accomplishment. Here's method of

²²¹ James Cain. *Double Indemnity*. New York: Wings Books, 1994.

accomplishment subdivided by poisons, by firearms, by gas, by drowning, by leaps. Here's suicide by poisons subdivided by sex, by race, by age, by time of day...And here—here, Mr. Norton— are leaps subdivided by leaps from high places, under wheels of moving trains, under wheels of trucks, under the feet of horses, from steamboats. *But there's not one case out of these millions of cases of a leap from the rear end of a moving train.* That's just one way they don't do it. (136)

Once he begins to patiently assess the probabilities of each aspect of the case, he notices that in more than one instance the facts of the case defy all likelihood. It is at this point in the narrative that Neff's plot appears destined to fail, as if regardless of its convincing exterior, there is some inevitable flaw that will eventually expose the corruption of the whole. In the film, what in part causes Neff to fold and produce a confession for Keyes is the knowledge or intuition that he will be exposed, that the falsity of his scheme is somehow fated to be brought to light. What eventually weighs down upon Neff is the powerful magnetism arising from his plan's *unlikelihood*, an unlikelihood that attracts his condemnation almost as a spiritual force. As Keyes says in the film,

Walter, I've been living with this little man for 26 years. He's never failed me yet. There's got to be something wrong—Well maybe Norton was right, maybe it was suicide—No not suicide, but not an accident either.—What else?—Now look Walter a guy takes out an accident policy that's worth \$100,000 if he's killed on a train, then two weeks later he is killed on a train, and not from a train accident mind you, but from falling off some silly observation car. Do you know what the mathematical probability of that is? One out of...oh, I don't know how many millions and then after that the broken leg. Now, it just can't be the way it looks. Something has been worked on us...—But we haven't got a single thing to go on, Keyes.—Oh, not too much, just 26 years experience, all the percentage variables and this hunk of concrete in my stomach.²²²

The way Keyes describes his own sixth sense is first as a “little man” and then as “this hunk of concrete in my stomach,” which is interesting firstly because, for someone who follows such a

²²² *Double Indemnity*. Dir. Billy Wilder. Paramount Pictures, 1944. Film.

detailed accumulation of statistical information, his judgements seem to originate more from an emotional/instinctual response. Secondly, returning to Ernst Bloch and his discussion of the expectant emotions, it is also this region of the body (stomach/solar plexus) that is supposedly home to such anticipation, angst, hope and other anxieties. However, from Keyes' statements it appears that his instinctual hunches are also intimately connected to this vast reservoir of statistical data. His own emotions in this particular field of criminology—or those of the trusty “little man” inside of him—are also the distilled impressions or even possibly *the visceral representations of statistical knowledge*. As we examined previously in Kafka's story and his own life, those officials charged with the duty of processing insurance claims against a host of statistical information must also have a vivid internal life which can imagine and formulate emotional responses to such information in order to establish its veracity. A significant part of Neff's feeling of fateful foreboding stems from his fear of Keyes' almost supernatural ability or what could be called his “statistical anxiety.”

Keyes is also, of course, portrayed in good noir fashion as a detective figure who follows his gut instincts and hunches in order to navigate through a world in which the difference between truth and fiction is difficult to perceive. This is also what distinguishes him in certain respects from an actual detective: *his job requires him to discover fiction which masquerades as truth whereas the detective is supposed to uncover the truth*. This play between truth and fiction is also pertinent to how both the novel and the film portray Neff's (“Huff” in the novel) actual confession. In the novel, we learn at the end of the story that the entire narrative up until the last two pages is actually Huff's statement for the insurance company in which he not only indicates his guilt, but possibly also takes creative freedom in explaining his motivations. In the film, the

voice-over narration, a signature feature of the noir genre is actually Neff's confession of his crime using Keyes' dictaphone, which also reinforces the idea that the insurance claim or statement may actually have a valuable story within it—or *that it even may be the story itself*.

In the novella, Cain describes the degree of pressure Huff was forced to live under as a result of his own actions, a pressure so great that he was “unable to get drunk after drinking a quart of bourbon.” However, this pressure is given an extra tinge of fateful inevitability in the film, whose dialogue was duly treated by the talents of both Billy Wilder and Raymond Chandler. “That was all there was to it. Nothing had slipped. Nothing had been overlooked. There was nothing to give us away, and yet, Keyes, as I was walking down the street to the drug store, suddenly it came over me that everything would go wrong. It sounds crazy, Keyes, but it's true, so help me. I couldn't hear my own footsteps. It was the walk of a dead man.” This passage is powerful because it shows how one's involvement in the unblemished execution of a fictional event somehow leads to an individual's erasure (his becoming-unreal) and eventual death as a fateful punishment for attempting to bring fiction into reality. When Neff claims that he can't hear his own footsteps, this suggests that his dangerous mixing of real-life with fiction will eventually cause his erasure in real-life. There is no clear rationale as to why Neff feels that he is destined for death right at the moment in which everything appears to be going exactly according to plan. However, it seems that he has struck upon some horrible anxiety, an anxiety attuned to his own fate and futurity.

It appears at this juncture in the film that Neff's irrepressible anxiety that he will eventually be caught comes directly as a result of his exploits “going exactly according to plan.” Because he has thought of everything and made his plan conform to all rational angles of

investigation, it has somehow made him aware that an exact conformity with objective standards is either not possible or rather, *forbidden*, and that this will be discovered by Keyes' "statistinkt," a mythical power lurking within a rationalistic paradigm. By his exact mimicry of objective standards, it actually seems as if Neff has conjured an anxiety of fateful and mythical inevitability in a completely rationalized world. This anxiety also leads him to make a series of decisions in a state of semi-panic that eventually lead to the death of his accomplice (who had also already betrayed him in several ways by this point), as well as his confession. In this case, it seems that the fraudulent mimicry of disenchanted rationality can lead to the emergence of magical myth within rationalized modernity.

It is important to note the role that private insurance had assumed by this time in the United States, as a secular form of dealing with both futurity and the "afterlife" (meaning the world of which the deceased was previously a part.) As Jason Puskar writes in his *William Dean Howells and the Insurance of the Real*,²²³

Insurance makes the condition of loss permanent by shifting it from the past to the future, so that loss is always waiting out there, distant in time, perhaps, but richly imagined in the present nonetheless. The industry's advertisements, contracts, and monthly premiums mark out spaces in the present that commemorate losses to come, and they thereby render those future losses real, undeniable, and specific, not to mention as vivid in the imagination as past loss could be in the memory. In bringing these facts and fears to consciousness, insurance restored some gravity to a culture light on ontological ballast.

In other words, the business of the insurance industry, beyond the work of indemnification and compensation, is the making-palpable of future losses that have not yet occurred. The industry's "literature" is also filled with narratives and fantasies which address the issue of confronting

²²³ Jason Puskar. "William Dean Howells and the Insurance of the Real." *American Literary History*. Volume 18, Number 1, (Spring 2006): pp. 29-58

one's own mortality, but also, and possibly more importantly, one's afterlife, memory, and continued presence, in other words one's *monumentality*. In this sense, insurance offers the individual the opportunity to imagine his own legacy in material and financial terms.

In fact, because insurance lacked a prominent set of signifiers to carry its weight in the mind of potential buyers, this was compensated for in the domains of architecture, literature and in the sphere of cultural preservation. "Insurers addressed this problem by creating an army of insurance agents, pouring money into advertising, and funding lavish, monumental architecture in America's largest cities. Insurance offices such Chicago's Home Insurance Building, the world's first skyscraper and a marvel when it opened in 1885, often were the largest and grandest of all downtown buildings." What we see here is that the insurance industry, lacking its own content, appropriates cultural content in order to create its business image to sell insurance.

By linking themselves to art, high culture, philanthropy, and even patriotic martyrdom, insurers de-emphasized their industry's function as a financial service and instead practiced what Nancy Glazener has called "cultural stewardship," the genteel, semi-philanthropic work associated with symphonies, libraries, and museums, which is conducted on behalf of the middle and working classes but which also helps consolidate organizers' power, privilege, and high social standing.

(43)

In this sense, insurance is linked with the industry of "cultural preservation" which chooses important facets of culture and consistently re-broadcasts them as powerful symbols of a nation, people, city, etc. Insurance shows itself to be the force which allows things to endure in the face of dangerous, unpredictable circumstances in an ever-changing modern world. Without insurance, we may have already lost the monumental works that define us as a culture (a gesture that is truly contradictory because these monumental works are defined as unique and irreplaceable), just as someone who is uninsured may have lost their house and all of their

possessions in a fire. In this regard it appears that insurance has a vital connection to the fruits of culture.

Insurance's demand for men to confront their mortality was also framed in patriotic and communal terms, as Puskar quotes from the president of New York Life, "The patriot who freely gives his life for his country, and the man who insures his life for the protection of his family, alike link their being with the future by unselfish devotion to present duty, and though they perish outwardly, they still live." (42) The language of this quote is quite radical in that through insurance one may "link their being with the future" even though they have perished corporeally. In a certain sense, this reads as an entrance into the immortality of the social collective, which certainly functions for the soldier as a way to connect his life to something that will outlive it. On the one hand, this quote equates buying life insurance to fulfilling a patriotic duty, which entails confronting the possibility of real death, while on the other, it also appears as something that belongs to what Heidegger calls "Das Mann."²²⁴ Das Mann embodies an inauthentic relation towards death in which it is experienced as something far-away or as if by someone else. This is interesting because one could argue, as Puskar does, that insurance compels the individual to face his mortality (and thus in a Heideggerian sense come into contact with a fundamental anxiety at the heart of being, an existential anxiety) and yet also claim that insurance takes this moment of existential anxiety between Dasein and the World and generalizes it en masse as an expression of what Heidegger calls "the they." Even though insurance entails an individual confrontation with one's own death, this death, as a percentage of necessary calamity in the modern world, is simply the individualization of abstract collective calamity experienced as

²²⁴ Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1962.

one's own. In fact, it may be more appropriate to say that insurance acts as an appropriation of the vital anxiety towards death by an abstract collective devoid of authenticity. Insurance squanders a very specific resource, namely, the particular anxiety which each individual has to his own death. However, this notion of insurance as an inauthentic appropriation is disputed in many ways in the film.

Later on in the film after Neff is approached by Keyes for recruitment, Keyes explains to Neff the essence of his expertise, and that his data is not simply a bunch of inert, lifeless numerical constructions.

Desk job. Is that all you can see in it?... Well that's not the way I look at it, Walter. To me a claims-man is a surgeon. That desk is an operating table, and those pencils are scalpels and bone chisels and those papers are not just forms and statistics and claims for compensation... they're alive! They're packed with drama, with twisted hopes and crooked dreams. A claims man, Walter, is a doctor and a bloodhound—[Phone Rings]—a claims-man is a doctor and bloodhound, and a cop and a judge and a jury and a father-confessor all in one, and you want to tell me you're not interested.²²⁵

Keyes suggests here that these forms and statistical tables are actually a *vital substance* that contain the stories that weave together a social body. These documents do not simply contain facts, they contain “drama,” “twisted hopes” and “crooked dreams.” In other words, the biopolitical rationalization of the social body in the form of statistics is the place where the vital substance of society is to be found, according to this claims adjuster. And his role is first and foremost that of the surgeon, someone who finds pathogenic elements within the human body and excises them, which when mapped onto a actuarial table, means the investigation of individual claims and the extraction of corrupt elements in order to heal the entire organism. It is

²²⁵ *Double Indemnity*. Dir. Billy Wilder. Paramount Pictures, 1944. Film.

interesting to pursue this metaphor further because in this case the particular mode in which corrupt elements attempt to undermine the organism is by *masquerading as normal attributes of the system, but for an adjuster, normal attributes of the system are disruptions, its calamities.*

Here, Keyes shows that he has the power to diagnose normal from pathological for the social body by examining biopolitical data that is “packed with drama.” This same thematic is emphasized in Cain’s novella, as well as in the movie, by the fact that the entire story (written as a letter in the book, and spoken by Neff into Keyes note-taking dictaphone) is a confessional statement written expressly for the insurance company. Here, it appears difficult to distinguish the literary, and its tropes, styles, and figures of speech from the actuarial statement, even in regards to truth-value. In most cases, distinguishing literary fiction from other kinds of expository writing is difficult to do purely on the basis of a formal analysis;²²⁶ however, what does ultimately separate these two kinds of writing is their divergent claims to truth. Other expository writing has a claim to be truthful, whereas literary fiction does not. However, in this instance it appears that the expository writing of the fraudulent insurance statement may be missing this attribute, as it truly is fiction.

This play between actuality and fiction may be complicated further if we examine the processes of remediation which went into the final adaption of this story in the 1944 film. While much film scholarship has been devoted to the adaption of James Cain’s novella to the screen, V. Penelope Pelizzon and Nancy M. West point out in their article, *Multiple Indemnity: Film Noir*;

²²⁶ See Hayden White. “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth.” *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution.”* Ed. Saul Friedlander. Boston: The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1992.

James M. Cain, and the Adaptations of a Tabloid Case,²²⁷ that the story for *Double Indemnity* is actually based on multiple tabloid treatments of the Snyder-Gray case in which Ruth Snyder convinced her lover Herman Judd Gray to murder her husband for his double-indemnity insurance policy, which ultimately led to his execution by the electric chair, an event that was photographed and broadcast throughout various media sources at the time. West and Pelizzon describe how the form and content of the tabloids were in the business of generating “adaption-ready” material for both film and literature (a trope also explored by Lang in *M*), and supplied the crime genre with a wealth of usable tropes and plot devices, including the “killer confession,” the “femme fatale,” and the “psychological portrait of the killer.” In their words,

Moreover, these tabloids were constantly adapting material themselves, employing a remarkable range of discursive strategies for recasting, remaking, and revising current events into popular amusement. To emphasize their status as adaptation-ready sites, tabloids borrowed from the stage, cinema, and fiction while simultaneously suggesting that their stories—gripping tales plucked right from the street—were simply waiting to be recycled in turn by these other forms. (213)

The form of the tabloid also appears to have assumed some of the properties used in other media for entertainment; thus, the initial appearance of such a real-life story is already mediated through the devices that are commonly thought to be reserved for fiction. In addition to this, due to their distillation of events into narrative components, tabloids then pave the way for the adaption of their content into other more “fictional” popular formats. The stakes of this are that the way in which the popular masses experience instances of disruption, crime, and disaster are already mediated through a form which processes them as raw material for fictional productions. Thus, the “content” of *Double Indemnity* experienced quite a complex journey of transmission,

²²⁷ Penelope Pelizzon and Nancy M. West. “Multiple Indemnity: Film Noir, James M. Cain, and the Adaptations of a Tabloid Case.” *Narrative*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Oct., 2005): pp. 211-237

mutation and remediation through a variety of media, although it is possible to say that the content is no longer the same after such extensive adaptation. It began as an event, a brutal slaying for collecting insurance money, after which the killers were apprehended by the police and a confession was extracted out of them. This whole story, including the narrative of the confession, was then covered by 132 reporters who then conveyed their stories in various tabloids, some of which were eventually read by James Cain. However, it appears that the grisly events of the Snyder-Gray case were already mediated through a quasi-fictional form, indicating the fictional version of the events already determines in some sense the way in which the events are disseminated.

It is also interesting to note the film's portrayal of anxieties around public transportation. In the film, the railroad is a site of anxiety, as seen by Phyllis's mimicry of a wife's consternation at her husband's railway journey. Also, Keyes' metaphor for the fact that the two killers will be tied together until their death is the figure of the trolley-car, which they must ride to the end of the line. "Yes I remembered. Just like I remember what you had told me Keyes..about that trolley car ride. And how there was no getting off until the end of the line...where the cemetery was. Then I got to thinking what cemeteries are for, there to put dead people in. I guess that was the first I ever thought about Phyllis that way...dead, I mean. How it would be if she were dead."²²⁸ The immediate associations here of death, criminality, and public transportation are quite interesting considering the history of Los Angeles, and how in the 1930's and 40's public transportation was demonized and the trolley-car system was eventually removed. *Double Indemnity* also provides quite a limited picture of the geographical space of Los Angeles, and

²²⁸ *Double Indemnity*. Dir. Billy Wilder. Paramount Pictures, 1944. Film.

when it does, it is often from viewpoint of characters while driving in an automobile. As Edward Dimendberg notes, “Though appearing early in the film noir cycle, *Double Indemnity* portends the growing sway of centrifugal space through the relative absence of the city, as well as the significance of the automobile as the modality through which the now diffused metropolis is primarily encountered.”²²⁹ Public space, as well as public transportation, seems to be conspicuously absent from the film and when it does appear it is usually directly connected with criminality, or referred to as a source of danger and anxiety. There are scenes which show Neff walking the streets of the Hollywood Hills, but without exception, this pedestrianism is always the lead-up to murder with varying degrees of premeditation. Similarly, the scene in which we actually see the train tracks and the public train station, we are compelled to view them already as a crime scene and to identify with the pressures of criminality that the characters must undergo in order to carry out their plan while observing these public surroundings.

These anxieties concerning public transportation are not merely rumors circulated by the automotive bourgeoisie; they are also reflected within the insurance system. The name of the film even refers directly to the double payout received if the insured party is killed in a train accident. What this suggests is that in Los Angeles, that which is truly public, and opened to the use and commingling of multiple social groups in the city, is haunted *a priori* by fears of contamination, accidents and by the specters of crimes already committed or which have not happened yet. Returning to Keyes’ statement which compares the fate of the two killers and their ability to withstand pressure during subsequent investigations to a trolley-car ride that ends at the cemetery, it seems also that part of problem of public transportation in the popular imaginary is

²²⁹ Edward Dimendberg. *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. p.173

that one is placed in much larger hands and at the whim and mercy of a fate that is beyond one's individual control. In other words, one is more easily subject to *becoming a statistic* or just another casualty of the (dis)functioning of the modern metropolis. Because public transportation entails that individuals must surrender their own decisive willpower and submit to the trajectory already determined for them (“...there are no stops until the end of the line...”), and cannot quickly turn the steering wheel to avoid a collision, it is suggested that one must at least unconsciously come to terms with the fact that when using the train, it could be the “one out of million” that does not reach its destination. Therefore, individuals must simultaneously acknowledge the statistical “fact” that a certain percentage of accidents will necessarily occur, and yet hope without any rational basis that they will not get into one. Los Angeles became the stretching automobile metropolis that it is in part by certain parties promulgating the relief from this anxiety of “becoming just another statistic” by driving a car.



The Fraudulent Disease and the Disenchantment of Disenchantment

Given the magnitude of such a literary undertaking as *Doctor Faustus*, it is possible to say that it could have been written in any number of places; however, there are a number of crucial elements in this work that are particularly inflected, if not altogether shaped, by Thomas Mann's experiences in Los Angeles. First and foremost, the musical system developed by the novel's central figure, Adrian Leverkühn, as a means of dislocating music from the clichéd formalism of a bourgeois aesthetic, is none other than the 12-tone system innovated by Schönberg, who also lived in west Los Angeles in the 1940's. Although, it does not appear that

Mann and Schönberg had much interaction with one another (or that Schönberg had any idea that his anti-ideological intervention in musical composition would be used as a metaphor for German national decay and a descent into barbarism), through the mediating influence of Theodore Adorno the works of all three Weimar masters became fused together in the novel. The influence of Adorno on *Doctor Faustus* has been documented in various sources as somewhat beyond the purview of his role as “aesthetics and music theory advisor”—some of which went as far to say that he could really be given authorial credit for quite significant sections of the novel.²³⁰ Adorno’s participation in the writing process can be seen primarily through the frequent evening discussions between the two men concerning aesthetics, in which Adorno is said to have given Mann an education in music theory, conversations which also were continued in written correspondence over the next decade that later were documented in the publication and translation of a sizable compendium of letters²³¹ (as well as in Mann’s autographical account of the three year writing process, *The Emergence of Doctor Faustus*.)²³² These correspondences also reveal that Mann more or less copied from Adorno’s unpublished writings that later became the *Philosophy of New Music*, to provide the material for his chapters on Leverkühn’s philosophy of composition.²³³ While Adorno seemed to be unfazed by this instance of esteemed borrowing,

²³⁰ James Macfarland. *Der Fall Faustus: Continuity and Displacement in Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno and Thomas Mann’s Californian Exile*. “From being a technical adviser on matters musical, a cultural diagnostician on matters philosophical, Adorno is promoted in this final stage to the status of coauthor.” (117)

²³¹ Thomas Mann und Th. W. Adorno. *Briefwechsel 1943-1945*.

²³² Thomas Mann. *The Emergence of Doctor Faustus*.

²³³ Justice Kraus. *Expression and Adorno’s Avant-Garde: The Composer in Doktor Faustus*. “Some of the formulations in Mann’s novel are virtually identical to passages from Adorno’s Philosophie der modernen Musik. Adorno’s basic theory about the historical development of artistic technique, for instance, appears repeatedly in the novel.” (172)

it did, however, seem necessary for Mann to include an author's note as an afterward to the novel explaining his indebtedness to Schönberg.²³⁴

This intellectual cross-pollination demonstrates how an idea of liberation from the shackles of stale cultural form (embodied in a musical system which aims to deliver tonality from its ideological baggage) may be interpreted as an expression of the “degeneration of culture into barbarism” when approached from a different angle. While Leverkühn's project of creating a liberated aesthetic comes at the expense of his own physical degradation due to his contraction of syphilis, it is also clear that his sickness is supposed to emblemize the insanity and folly of Hitler and the Nazis in their essentially maniacal attempt to counterfeit a transhistorical culture of a racially privileged “Volk.” Thus, although Leverkühn's disease “mimics” the dynamic crests and troughs of Germany's tumultuous history, it seems that Mann is also suggesting that the de-spiritualization and de-romanticization of the artist's will in his or her creations, as well as the disenchantment of musical form in the 12-tone system, is the rationalistic underside to his maniacal sickness. However, if we grant that classical music (as a metaphor for culture overall) has already become disenchanted in its bourgeois instantiations by stock-in-trade figures and movements, then it appears that this novel is really about exploring the fallout of a “disenchantment of disenchantment,” a modality whose hubris is paralleled with the pitfalls of National Socialism.

Another important LA-inflected aspect of this novel is the unnamed, yet ever-lurking specter of Hollywood. The entire impetus behind Leverkühn's wish to develop his own aesthetic

²³⁴ However, this afterward was included only in later editions of the novel after Schönberg sent a letter to Mann, in which he pretended to be writing from the future with the claim that Schönberg had tried to take credit for the musical system known as 12 tone away from its true progenitor Thomas Mann. This ironic chiding of Mann compelled him to at least give credit to Schoenberg in a disclaimer.

comes from a disgust with the prefabricated spectacles manufactured for passive listeners, unwilling to do any real work to engage with the work of art. This denigration of listening (a phenomenon which Adorno also attacked as a pernicious result of the radio)²³⁵ spells for Leverkühn the decease of any real art that deserves its name, an art which can be described as a successful attempt to embody transcendent virtues within earthly form. However, during the time in which *Doctor Faustus* takes place, during the Wilhelmine era up into late-Weimar, it already appears that the play of surfaces and postmodern loss of depth was underway in the eyes of the author, even though the book was written in the 1940's. Fredric Jameson also references this work as an important source of his working concept of pastiche,²³⁶ a montage use of different forms and styles (often unrelated to one another) placed together within ironic proximity, however, without any real irony involved. This notion is foundational for Jameson's discussion of how postmodernism's aleatory play of surfaces without any transcendental referent expresses the "cultural logic" of late Capitalism. In his search for an aesthetic unhampered by a wooden musical tradition, Leverkühn sought out moments of vitality beyond the constraints of his own historical period, in a manner that sought to move beyond compositional form that had been classically construed as the "freezing" of the vital composing agency in the piece. In good Adornian fashion, Leverkühn adopted the creed that the composer must always renounce traditional methods and rather emphasize a break with tradition as his creative thrust.²³⁷

²³⁵ Theodore Adorno. "On Popular Music." *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, New York: Institute of Social Research, 1941, IX, 17-48

²³⁶ Fredric Jameson. *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. New York: Verso, 1991.

²³⁷ Theodore W. Adorno *Philosophy of New Music*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

In discussions between Zeitblom, the narrator, and Leverkühn, midway through the novel, Leverkühn explains his musical ambitions clearly as a break with the history of composition in that the creative component to composing only appears in the making of the *system* used to generate the work.

“Very remarkable,” said I. “The way you describe the thing, it comes to a sort of composing before composition. The whole disposition and organization of the material would have to be ready when the actual work should begin, and all one asks is: which is the actual work? For this preparation of the material is done by variation, and the creative element in variation, which one might call the actual composition, would be transferred back to the material itself—together with the freedom of the composer. When he went to work, he would no longer be free.” “Bound by self-imposed compulsion to order, hence free.” (193)

In this early description in the novel of the 12-tone system, both characters point out that the creative impulse and the order that is generated from it is not to be found in the piece of music itself, but rather within the serial system which generated it. This system serves to remove individual notes from their embeddedness within a melodic and harmonic contextual history; yet, “[t]he polyphonic dignity of every chord-forming note would be guaranteed by the constellation.” Thus, the tonal system generates new, historically specific contexts for tonal configurations to emerge, to some degree also by chance, in which each element may be free of its history of musical association. In this sense, the musical material is freed inside a restrictive system constructed by mathematical values and logic, a mathematics which imputes tonal elements with a serial and numerical identity. It is important to emphasize here that the dynamic, or *vital*, character of musical elements becomes available and restored through a mathematical simulation of their being, a simulation that would normally be associated with results that are more robotic and mechanistic than life-like.

Zeitblom also critiques Leverkühn's system as one which places too much store in the value and contribution of the factor of "constellation"²³⁸ in generating a context in which tonal elements express themselves and become musically significant. As Zeitblom appears to support a more classical notion of composition that calls for the triumph of an inner strength and will of the composer over his work, he judges Leverkühn's reliance on the tonal constellation to belie a mysticism inherent to the young composer's approach. "And besides, excuse me; 'constellation' is your every other word. But surely it belongs more to astrology. The rationalism you call for has a good deal of superstition about it—of belief in the incomprehensibly and vaguely daemonic, the kind of thing we have in games of chance, fortune-telling with cards, and shaking dice. Contrary to what you say, your system seems to me more calculated to dissolve human reason in magic." (193-194) Zeitblom's play with the astrological meaning laden within the term "constellation" points at a paradoxical dimension that inheres both within Leverkühn's work and modern-day astrological systems, which can be described as a mutual coexistence or symbiosis between rationalism and the occult. In a later work by Adorno, *The Stars Down to Earth*,²³⁹ he analyzes the astrological column of the Los Angeles Times, and comes up with an observation that is the obverse of Zeitblom's. The astrology practiced by the LA Times staff works toward making the individual adjust himself to a set of inevitable conditions in which he must live and act practically. Larger astrological tendencies are always underway which the individual cannot control, but he can follow the mundane advice proffered by these pseudo-occult specialists on how to adjust themselves to the larger influences that remain fundamentally invisible to the

²³⁸ There is also a strong parallel here with Benjamin in his theory of history and photography in both *Arcades Project* and the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*.

²³⁹ Theodore W. Adorno. *The Stars Down to Earth*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

naked eye without the appropriate astrological guidance.²⁴⁰ In the same way that Leverkühn is accused of mystifying the power of musical constellation, in which a daemonic impulse could emerge and completely detourn the expressivity of a musical tone, here the astrological constellation is also quietly responsible in the background for the revelation and subsequent meaning of individual characteristics. But in the case of 12-tone music the constellation is produced out of rationalized and serialized placement of individual tones, whereas with astrology it originates from some otherworldly, esoteric power. Within astrology, at least of the newspaper variety, an alchemy of sorts is performed which transforms celestial events into the most rationalized behavioral prescriptions for individuals living in capitalist society. In 12-tone music, the most deracinated arrangement of tones is somehow capable of producing mystical daemonic compositions characterized by an incorruptible vitality.

This counter-intuitive, and dialectical, depiction of vitality in music has a variety of metaphorical and narrative antecedents in *Doctor Faustus*, moments which point toward different conceptions of vitalism in general. This occurs early in the novel in reference to Adrian's Father, Jonathan Leverkühn, whose interest in biology and a desire to "speculate the elements" was something which he reverently tried to pass down to his son and to Zeitblom. However, it appears that while his father carefully explained the dynamics of natural processes to his son, Adrian could not help but become giddy with laughter, barely suppressing its eruptions before the solemn presence of his father. Zeitblom indicates that Adrian meant no offense by this, but rather was somehow compelled to react in such a way to the phenomena he saw. Jonathan's descriptions were not altogether hardened by the nomenclature of scientific discourse, and gave

²⁴⁰ Cary J. Nederman and James Wray Goulding. *Popular Occultism and Critical Social Theory: Exploring Some Themes in Adorno's Critique of Astrology and the Occult. Sociological Analysis*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (Winter, 1981), pp. 325-332

way, rather, to an undercurrent of mysticism. Zeitblom describes this fascination with the mysteries of nature as something which gained the reproach of the Christian doctrine because it seemed as though within nature there was a “libertine traffic with forbidden things, despite the obvious contradiction involved in regarding the Creation, God, Nature and Life as a morally depraved field. Nature itself is too full of obscure phenomena not altogether remote from magic—equivocal moods, weird, half-hidden associations pointing to the unknown...” (13) However, what stands out in this introduction to Leverkühn's upbringing in natural philosophy is the likening of natural processes to fakery and fraudulence, demonstrated in one instance by a tropical insect of the *Morpho* genus whose dazzling azure color was only the result of light refraction and the exclusion of other colors of the spectrum, meaning that it was “no true color at all.” When his wife states that this was merely a trick and somehow inauthentic, Jonathan retorts that a blue sky's color is also not the result of a particular pigment, meaning that trickery in nature appears to be more the rule than the exception.

This discussion of the depth of mimicry in nature continues with the description of the butterfly *Haetera Esmeralda*, a species so adept at camouflage that it even goes so far as to copy the blemishes of its objects of mimicry. “Yes, yes, Nature knows her leaf precisely: knows not only its perfection, but also its small usual blunders and blemishes; mischievously or benevolently she repeats its outward appearance in another sphere, on the under side of this her butterfly, to baffle others of her creatures.” (14) However, what is truly noteworthy is another species that does not hide but advertises itself because it knows that it tastes disgusting, so no predators will even attempt to eat it. This led to many other butterflies “dressing up” as this revolting species and also mimicking their clumsy flight patterns. The last instance of mimicry in

nature discussed in this chapter of the book concerns the behavior of ice crystals in which the question of the imperviousness of the distinction between the organic and inorganic is interrogated. “Did, he inquired, these phantasmagorias prefigure the forms of the vegetable world or did they imitate them. Neither one nor the other, he answered himself; they were parallel phenomena. Creatively dreaming Nature dreamed here and there the same dream: if there could be thought of imitation then surely it was reciprocal...If I understood my host aright, then what occupied him was the essential unity of animate and so-called inanimate nature...” (18)

At this point the discussion seems to have moved beyond the concept of mimicry to larger questions of form and origin in nature. If both the organic and the inorganic mimic one another, is it possible to reference some other design altogether which they both attempt to resemble? Or even more strangely, is there no grand design whatsoever to speak of, and the only explanation for all of creation is the endless, yet imperfect, mimicry between elements in the natural world? This is of course where the gnostic notion of the Demiurge comes in as an intermediary between the “Creator-god” and the phenomenal world, as a “master-craftsman” who shapes the Creation into its material form. However, it appears that the work of the Demiurge is beyond morality, and that this messy material side of creation allows the interpenetration of the forbidden and the praised forms of life.²⁴¹

This thematic is picked up later in the novel in narration of Adrian’s discussion with Mephistopheles when making their agreement, in which Adrian suggests that he will “grow osmotic growths.” Here I will quote a longer passage:

²⁴¹ For a longer discussion on gnosticism in Thomas Mann, see Kirsten J. Grimstad. *The Modern Revival of Gnosticism and Thomas Mann's Doktor Faustus*. Rochester: Camden House, 2002.

This is what I think: that an untruth of a kind that enhances power holds its own against any ineffectively virtuous truth. And I mean too that creative, genius-giving disease, disease that rides on high horse over all hindrances, and springs with drunken daring from peak to peak, is a thousand times dearer to life than plodding healthiness. I have never heard anything stupider than that from disease only disease can come. Life is not scrupulous—by morals it sets not a fart. It takes to the reckless product of disease, feeds on and digests it, and as soon as it takes it to itself it is health. Before the fact of fitness for life, my good man, all distinction of disease and health falls away. A whole host and generation of youth, receptive, sound to the core, flings itself on the work of the morbid genius, made genius by disease: admires it, praises it, exalts it, carries it away, assimilates it unto itself and makes it over to culture, which lives not on home-made bread alone, but as well on provender and poison from the apothecary's shop at the sign of the Blessed Messengers...You will lead the way, you will strike up the march of the future, the lads will swear by your name, who thanks to your madness will no longer need to be mad. On your madness they will feed in health, and in them you will become healthy. Do you understand? Not only will you break through the paralyzing difficulties of the time—you will break through time itself, by which I mean the cultural epoch and its cult, and dare to be barbaric, twice barbaric indeed, because of coming after the humane, after all possible root-treatment and bourgeois refinement. (242)

This passage discusses the source of genius as laden within a debilitating disease that while helping the mind and soul gather their powers to produce a work of genius, the body will lay in anguish. Mephistopheles demonstrates, however, that the relationship between disease and life itself is somehow *more vital* than that between healthiness and life. Healthiness may after all quarantine the soul from its potential sources of power and inspiration. The creative principle within life itself seems to require distortions and disruptions in order to stretch the boundaries of the organism to accommodate new characteristics. However, what this passage truly brings home is the value of untruth over truth in both vital and creative processes, and equating this

masquerading power with the genius of disease, a disease which begins to take on an enchanted magical quality.

Leverkühn's aesthetic project is essentially an unlikely marriage between naked instinct and the mathematical linearity of serial composition. As a result, because the emergence of raw instinctual power has no corresponding form within the realm of bourgeois culture, he must revert to parody in which the unlikely combination and detournment of musical form and motif suggests the inexpressibility of genius within the bourgeois aesthetic universe. His work is also characterized by the adoption of mythological works, stories and *Volkslieder* that convey a content of pre-enlightenment community before the “disenchantment of the world” through scientific rationality and secularism. However, in this case the cultural content of the works does not organically spring from the life of a people, toiling in fear against the invisible powers of a possessed, supernatural environment; rather, they spring from intellectuality itself, the cold understanding of form and its combinatory potential. Just like the ice crystals, Leverkühn's work functions through a mimicry of vital substances and organic forms; although, it's method is characterized by the delinking of tonality from the realm of ideology and sentimentality.

He deliberately brought to Kretschmar unfinished things in order to be told what he knew already, then to laugh at the artistic sense, the connoisseurship, of his teacher, which entirely coincided with his own: the understanding which is the actual agent of the work-idea—not the idea of a particular work but the idea of the opus itself, the objective and harmonic creation complete, the manager of its unified organic nature; which sticks the cracks together, stops up the holes, brings out that ‘natural flow’—which was not there in the first place and so is not natural at all, but a product of art—in short, only in retrospect and indirectly does this manager produce the impression of the spontaneous and the organic. In a work there is much seeming and sham, one could go further and say that as ‘a work’ it is seeming in and for itself. Its ambition is to make one

believe that it is not made, but born like Pallas Athene in full fig and embossed armour from Jupiter's head. But that is a delusion. (180)

The passage demonstrates how the creative agency which unites the work with itself and which breathes life into it is in fact the most artificial and unnatural aspect about it. But, after the fact, it appears as if it was spontaneous. Here, it seems that the true office of artistic agency is to masquerade as a vital force; although it can never truly be alive. Art in this sense is fraudulence “in and for itself,” and successful fraud is what makes true art in its aesthetic and cultural reach. This method almost goes as far as divorcing tonality from its cultural meaning and history. This question concerning the authenticity and true vitality of the organic is something which returns thematically throughout the novel, but it appears more often that reaching a new depth of vital force, one must go to greater lengths to disassociate oneself from the present era, and even further, to fake an intimacy with the vital principle of previous eras. In this regard it is shown in the novel that the inauthentic copy of the organic may be more in the service of life than the healthiest organisms of a particular species. In this same way, it may be that disease which mimics life may do more for this life than its actual offspring.

Leverkühn's contraction of syphilis, as the moment of his dance with *Daemonie*, is also the point at which his individual life opens up to the field of life undergirding civilized society, the biosocial sphere of intimacy between all strata of humanity. In this sense, Adrian's daemonic mode of simulation calls into being the vital realm of biosocial intimacy; his illness and mode of simulation have the power to mutually conjure one another. His contact with this sphere is what ultimately destroyed his individual life, but also allowed him to generate a monumental work. In this sense, the uniting of “bare life” with an aesthetic form may generate a monumental work, but it will require the sacrifice of the individual, qualified life, the life which the entirety of Adorno's

Minima Moralia aims to salvage and redeem through a negative dialectic. Illness is an important theme of the novel also because it represents a vital desire in Adrian that exceeds his otherwise analytical demeanor, as a carnal lusting after a prostitute from whom he contracted syphilis. This fleshy lust goes against the grain of his cold character, according to Zeitblom, and thus for him would be the exceptional moment that proves the rule. Zeitblom also learns of his friend's contraction of the disease through a letter he wrote in parody form—here again the daemonic must take the form of the parodic. Also, this very letter will outlast Adrian, as it is included into the book, which interestingly shows that parody and sham will outlast the authentic and take its place on the altar of history.²⁴² Disease is an important figure in the story and in the general context of the story because it embodies the very problem of the breakdown of the human being. Once infected, is the individual still human or also the agent, or host of the invisible workings of the disease? Mephistopheles' observations in their discussion entail that disease is actually the source of genius, the affliction by the pressures of non-human vital forces upon the human. Thus, the great works of culture, which stand outside of time in some sort of immortal medium, may often achieve their status from conveying the ineffable logic of the non-human.

In Heidegger's essay "The Origin of the Work of Art"²⁴³ we see a similar dynamic at work. A work of art attains its status as such by its capacity to "ground" the world of a community, and a community "becomes itself" through the preservation of this work. In his ontological distinction between "earth" and "world," we can see that earth refers to the undisclosed domain of things which cannot be unlocked or manipulated by human effort, as they

²⁴² Considering that we only learn of his experience through the parodic letter, it is also possible—in keeping with the notion of a fraudulent disease—that such an event never happened, but is rather a fraud which invokes a daemonic contraction of a mimetic illness.

²⁴³ Martin Heidegger. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. New York: Perennial Classics, 1971.

remain impenetrable. For him the work of art must integrate “earth” into its very being in such a way as to allow the earthly element to express itself in its own manner—*as undisclosed*. Thus, the work of art is founded upon the unadulterated inclusion of the non-human, as well as its preservation by the community. If we relate this to Leverkühn, we can see the presence of the *daemonic*, the non-human in him in the form of the disease which compels him to find the formal means to express something which has no form and cannot be expressed—this is how a work may become enduring and live in its own time. However, what is, of course, an absolute break with Heideggerian thought is the fact that Leverkühn’s works are defined by their inauthenticity.

In a sense then it seems that an important characteristic of the work of art which attains this status through its preservation by the community is this quality of fraudulence or simulation because in the Heideggerian sense the work holds the simultaneity of both earth and world, but this must always be sham. Even though the materials used in the work may in some important way reveal their earthly qualities, there is always something inherently inauthentic to them because their arrangement does not originate in the natural world. The work of art tries to faithfully reproduce earth in such a way, as if its own qualities seem born into the work, and it is this almost surgical process which gives the work its *Lebendigkeit* which also entails its inexhaustibility for audiences of the next generation. However, in order for Adrian to produce works of lasting, inexhaustible significance, he must somehow produce from a place positioned right at the heart of this culture’s vital existence. Adrian gains entrance into the vital dimension of the social body through the conduit of infection, which, while portraying the same debilitating syphilis that Nietzsche suffered from,²⁴⁴ the disease also may be characterized differently.

²⁴⁴ James Schmidt. “Mephistopheles in Hollywood: Adorno, Mann, and Schoenberg.” *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*. ed. Tom Huhn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Because of the fact that Adrian calls the prostitute *Haetera Esmeralda* in a parodic letter written to Zeitblom, in which he admits to contracting the illness, indicates an important comparison. In his father's zoological literature, this species of butterfly was the queen of camouflage; it could make itself indistinguishable from its immediate environment. This indicates that Leverkühn's contamination by the prostitute is for him also the contamination by the power of mimicry, a disease which Mephistopheles claims will drive, invigorate and enrich life, not just simply produce more disease.

Thus, we have here an instance of disease which can be labeled as the capacity for mimicry, which can seamlessly link the fraudulent with the organic, a feature which may give the work of art its aura, even in an age of the cultural industry and mechanical reproduction. This is now a third aspect to unpacking the relationship between disease and mimicry. Before, with Malte, we discussed how the disease itself, in its symptomatic multi-valence, would mimic attributes of its host, dredging up secrets and behaviors repressed within the individual psyche, even though it itself had no specifically positive content. We then moved on to a discussion of disease simulation in which individuals mimicked the symptoms of disease either by virtue of the power of suggestion or in order to receive financial gain, which in many cases actually led to onset of actual illnesses. This next instance describes a disease that has also the quasi-magical power of primitive mimesis which can essentially blur the distinction between nature and culture, and in the process generate works of art; however, the modality of this resurgence of the primitive is through the simulation of the objective-rational. This mimetic capacity within the human is considered a sickness because it does not function within a rationalistic paradigm, but it also itself is akin to a more primitive relationship to disease, in which disease was figured as

possession or embodiment. Thus, the resurgence of the mimetic is also the resurgence of an already superseded modality of disease-perception.

What is at stake here is the fear of reversion to a quasi-primitive state of mimesis, a modality of behavior which is also feared as a mode of perception. Perceiving hints of the spectral world, which primitive mimesis in its era would attempt protect the community from through magical ceremony, is, from a certain standpoint, already a symptom of a contagious illness, an illness which is somehow transmitted from person to person without the necessity of physical or biological contact. Fascism also partakes in this by instigating a controlled dissemination of a way of seeing which will collectively hallucinate a monstrous conspiracy behind the face of the jew, but what is of course feared about the jew, the aim of the conspiracy, is the infection by which the race lapses into primitive mimesis and perceives the world with a pre-modern gaze. What is ironic about the emergence and fear of such an illness—which may or may not even exist—is that it seems to assume a literary form on a much more frequent basis in a historical period which has no epistemological framework with which to verify it or to grant it legibility. In fact, this kind of contagious communicability has no place whatsoever within our modern scientific paradigm; although, *this very paradigm may be a significant part of its etiology.*

This mythic dimension to disease also figures quite strongly in *Doctor Faustus*, as disease is often described as originating from an altogether from a different dimension.

“Astrological times knew a lot. They knew, or divined, things which science in its broadest scope is coming back to. That diseases, plagues, epidemics, have to do with the position of the stars was to those times an intuitive certainty. Today we have got so far as to debate whether

germs, bacteria, organisms which, we say, can produce an influenza epidemic on earth come from other planets—Mars, Jupiter, or Venus.’ Contagious diseases, plague, black death, were probably not of this planet; as, almost certainly indeed, life itself has not its origin on our globe, but came hither from outside.” (273-274) This passage indicates how disease, while not only being figured as otherworldly, also appears somehow as a more unrefined, primal form of life, which may more easily recall the inner-workings of life itself. This radical vitality of contagious disease suggests the viewpoint that really the evolution and development of the human species has to thank the microbiological world of disease for its existence, for, it is postulated that the very same forces, said to originate somewhere else in the galaxy, that are behind massive die-offs of the population, are also part of the same mystical ilk that brought life to earth in the first place. Or as Leverkühn and Zeitblom pay tribute to Baudelaire, humanity and its achievements is the result of the immoral traffic of nature, “The flower of evil.” Disease, in this context, seems to carry its own history and repertoire of forms and states of being experienced by different members of human species over quite large spans of time. Disease may also act as an archive of sorts which stores moments and behaviors of anthropological significance, in which those afflicted with the illness will rehearse and mimic these states of being which have a species’ level of significance.

As Zeitblom notes, it seems that in the artist, who has somehow quarantined himself from the healthy world around him has been able to develop a courage that is not germane to the healthy individual. This artistic bravery may really be described as an illness. “Was I not right to say that the depressive and exalted states of the artist, illness and health, are by no means sharply divided from each other? That illness rather in illness, as it were under the lee of it, elements of

health are at work, and elements of illness, working genius-like, are carried over into health....genius is a form of vital power deeply experienced in illness, creating out of illness, through illness creative.” (355) The disease of syphilis which Adrian suffers from is also considered medically to be the “great imitator”²⁴⁵ in that the early symptoms of a stage one infection are extremely difficult to distinguish from those of various other diseases. This discussion of mimicry as a natural principle of the disease is also a crucial for understanding its images in history. Particularly due to the fact that the illness goes through four phases and usually ending with states of mental breakdown, the disease follows a peculiar and multivalent expression of contagion and contagiousness, appearing to move through a repertoire of symptoms belonging to other diseases. This dynamic within the infection itself parallels the simulative powers of Adrian in his fraudulent quest to conjure the vital forces that supposedly do not belong to him or to his historical moment.

It is interesting that the fever hallucinations from Adrian’s illness tended to esteem and admire the mythical world and its austere grandeur. Zeitblom explains how Adrian would talk incoherently about the myth of the sea-maid from Andersen’s fairy tales and her conversion to join the two-legged world.

“It begins,” he said, “with the cult of the marble statue that had got down to the bottom of the sea, the boy, who is obviously by Thorwaldsen, and her illegitimate taste for it. Her grandmother should have taken the thing away from her instead of letting her plant a rose-red mourning wreath in the blue sand. They had let her go through too much, too early, after that the yearning and hysterical overestimation of the upper world and immortal soul cannot be controlled. An immortal soul—but why? A perfectly absurd wish; it is much more soothing to know that after death one will be the foam on the sea, as Nature wills. A proper nixie would have taken this empty-handed

²⁴⁵ F Fitzgerald. “The Great Imitator, Syphilis.” Medical Staff Conference, University of California, San Francisco. *West J Med* 134:424-432, May 1981.

prince, who did not know how to value her and who married someone else before her face and eyes, led him to the marble steps of his palace, drawn him into the water, and tenderly drowned him instead of making her fate depend as she did on his stupidity. Probably he would have loved her much more passionately with the fish-tail she was born with than with those extremely painful legs. . . The sea-wife had perfectly complete and charming organic reality, beauty and inevitability; you saw that at once, when she became so pathetically déclassé after she had bought herself legs, which nobody thanked her for.” (344)

This fairy tale description, told in state of morbid hallucination, explains the folly of lusting after the intoxicant of civilization, and its spiritual companion, the transcendent god. The sea-maid’s “hysterical overestimation of the upper world” occurs not through any encounter with the mundane properties of this world, but rather through an encounter with the sunken aesthetic marvel of the cult of marble statue, a work whose origins would seem to derive from an impulse to worship and bond with the powers and forces of nature, rather than dominate them in civilized fashion. The fairy tale marks the moment of becoming-civilized as none other than a moment of degradation, as the sea-maid is clearly declassed from her acquisition of legs, losing her “charming, organic reality.”

All of this comes to Adrian through the medium of the microbe, a practically invisible companion to the human throughout its history. The microbe produces visions which praise a mythical world in which the hybrid entities, part-human and part-animal, are found thriving and robust.

And with an objectivity that could only be in jest, but with drawn brows and reluctantly moving, half-articulated lips, he spoke of the aesthetic advantages of the nixie’s shape over that of the forked human kind, of the charm of the lines with which the feminine form flowed from the hips into the smooth-scaled, strong, and supple fish-tail, so well adapted for steering and darting. He rejected all idea of a monstrosity, whatever attaches in the popular mind to mythological

combinations of the human and the animal; and declared that he did not find admissible mythological fictions of that kind. (344)

The world in which these features come together is not only described as aesthetically superior to human form; these combinations are also practically advantageous, in that the fish-tail is so perfectly adept at “steering and darting.” But, apparently such a form cannot be bought in the way that human legs can. It seems that one can only be born with such a constitution. It would seem for Adrian that the opposite exchange would be the most advantageous for his ambitions, but for some reason, it appears that a trade-off in the other direction is much more dangerous, if not almost impossible.

A bit further in the novel comes a discussion of various biblical tales from Breisacher’s exegesis, with particular emphasis on King David’s census. “He was too ignorant, for instance, to realize the dynamic dangers of a general census of the population; and by instituting one had brought about a serious biological misfortune, an epidemic with high mortality; a reaction of the metaphysical powers of the people, which might have been foreseen. For a genuine folk simply could not stand such a mechanizing registration, the dissolution by enumeration of the dynamic whole into similar individuals...” (283) This mythical story must be examined for its logical content in that the application of apparatuses of security to administer the population generate the eruption of an epidemic that illustrates the impossibility of complete knowledge of the population through the efforts of statistical assessment. The appearance of the epidemic is also connected to the emergence of biological interrelationships within the population that cannot be itemized or quantified. In this case, the very application of normative biopolitical procedures to quantify collective life leads to the mythic eruption of biosociality that cannot be comprehensively perceived by technologies of human governance.

It is also interesting to note that degrading and debilitating outbreaks of Adrian's syphilis correspond directly to periods of crisis within German history. As Zeitblom says, Adrian's illness seems to be parallel the collapse of the epoch of bourgeois humanism, which after World War I in the spring of 1919 seems to have vanished without a trace. However, what is also not mentioned in this literary work, or in many historical and literary works describing this period, is that the end of the war also brought about the deadliest plague in human history, whose scale was that of a global pandemic that killed anywhere from 50 to 100 million people.²⁴⁶ Although the black death was estimated to have decimated one fifth of the world's population, the influenza epidemic of 1918-1919 was worse in scope and number. It seems important to point out that this historical rupture in which the faith in bourgeois humanism and technical and scientific progress as the promise of a more enlightened future was fatally tampered with was also within the same historical moment as this deadly plague. The very capacities for destruction evident within the era of modern technological warfare were also to be found outside of technology, in the world of microbiology. The eruption of this novel, or possibly prehistoric virus, produced mass death at the level of the species, reaching approximately 1% of the earth's total human population. While the mass death of heavy artillery in the war traumatized the rank and file of the German military, leading to a veritable explosion of cases of shell-shock and so-called instances of "male hysteria," the appearance of such a plague within a "modern" era defined by hygiene, sanitation and scientific certainty, must have been equally world-shattering, destabilizing the security in infrastructure, as well as the common belief structure of the "disenchanted world." It is possible to see this moment in particular as a resurgence of the "barbaric" through a saturation of the

²⁴⁶ Mike Davis. *The Monster at our Door: The Global threat of Avian Flu*. New York and London: The New Press, 2005.

apparatuses of civilization in the sense that through technologies of warfare and transportation virulent microscopic life-forms were also capable of a reach and extension never before seen in history. The excesses of civilization in this case produced a pandemic catastrophe which humbled humanity to its vulnerability to a natural world that it believed to be under its domination.

Chapter 5: The Transmutation of Self into Other: Specters of Contagion in Southern California
Science Fiction

According to Thomas Kuhn, when we examine science as a historical phenomenon, its governing ideas and theorems start to seem less abstract, and suddenly appear to be result of various stories and plots, in which human motivations and ambitions, as well as random occurrences, have quite an impact on scientific truths and paradigms.²⁴⁷ However, what is truly striking in his analysis is his investigation of cases of when certain kinds of science are suddenly deposed and are no longer considered to be scientific. When historians of science come up against scientific theories from the past, it is often difficult to distinguish them from what be would more commonly known as myth. “Simultaneously, these same historians confront growing difficulties in distinguishing the ‘scientific’ component of past observation and belief from what their predecessors had readily labeled ‘error’ and ‘superstition.’ The more carefully they study, say, Aristotelian dynamics, phlogistic chemistry, or caloric thermodynamics, the more certain they feel that those once current views of nature were, as a whole, neither less scientific nor more the product of human idiosyncrasy than those current today.” (2) The difficulty of confronting past science as myth entails the more dubious problem of confronting current science as potential myth, a problem which threatens to unravel the stringency of such a distinction when seen from a historical perspective. Considering that ruling theories and postulates that may have stood unchallenged for generations are instantly struck down by the appearance of new proofs, proofs which not only unseat them from any claim to authority they have in the present world, but also any claim to authority which they may have had in the past.

²⁴⁷ Thomas S. Kuhn. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1962.

What this suggests is that there is always a mythic dimension to the ruling ideas of every era because of the sheer possibility that these ideas will cease to be scientifically valid at some point.

This mythic dimension to science is a central attribute of science fiction because within science fiction, especially of the futuristic sort, one can “look back” on the current historical period and see its epistemological flaws, inconsistencies and the dominant trends which were eventually overturned by new discoveries. Science fiction produces a critical distance between ourselves and the truths we take for granted, causing an alienation effect between us and the ruling ideas of our own historical period. While in some cases this simply demotes a theory or precept to a status with lesser extension and reach, it often entails the transformation of something conceived to be scientific into a “superstition.” This notion clearly embodies a logic of reflexive modernization of the sciences in that the scientific process not only disenchant previous myths, but also disenchant its own products, transforming them into myths. We are thus often invited by science fiction to conceive of our current epistemological moment as mythological, which from a historical standpoint of the future (or the past) it could very well be.

In Kuhn’s theoretical framework, “normal science” functions to furnish cumulative evidence for a given scientific paradigm and its reach; however, in the process it is possible that experiments will yield results or demonstrate unexplainable behavior that does not fall under the logic of the paradigm—these instances are, of course, what he refers to as anomalies. Once anomalies are shown to be unavoidable and repeatable within patterns of experimentation, this necessitates a new theory to explain their existence, one which may often undermine the operative paradigm. While this chapter is not concerned with the processes of scientific experimentation and the appearance of anomalies within a laboratory context, it will focus on

literature and film that narrates the often disruptive emergence of anomalies within normative modes of understanding, and how these anomalies are actually perceived. Considering that disruptions within normative modes of perception and understanding can often be traumatic, this chapter will examine the forms and tropes deployed in processing the traumatic and shocking content of such anomalous disruptions.

One of the central thematics that this chapter will explore is the narrative experiences of a transformation of self into other and its psychological effects, a transformation in which an unknown contagion or a traumatic experience with the irrational has catalyzed a process of embodiment and becoming. What becomes visible in such fantasies is a racist view of the other (an other that was previously, and only a few shades away from, self) that is justified by the fact that the other's aim is none other to infect, absorb and in principle eradicate the protagonist species. Of course, the form which eradication takes in this case is not obliteration, but rather transmutation, suggesting that the limits and parameters of the species are actually porous, and vulnerable to contamination, a contamination that could eventually take over the foundations of the organism, whatever these may be. The primary anxiety here is that the species's or group's demise is actually a mutation in it's being that ends its diachronic self-similarity, abruptly. However, this loss of self-similarity is framed in most horror and science fiction narratives as a catastrophic end, rather than a continuation by other means.

Priscilla Wald explores aspects of this extinction/mutation dynamic in her book *Contagious*²⁴⁸ with explicit reference the different versions, film and literary, of the sci-fi/horror classic, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. This story, or set of stories, portrays an extraterrestrial

²⁴⁸ Priscilla Wald. *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008.

threat against humanity, in which an alien species assumes the form of individual humans in such a way that they appear to be almost exactly as they were, but with slight changes in their behavior and emotional responses, indicating that the spark of interior spontaneity which defines their humanity has somehow been tampered with and replaced by something sinister, and seemingly robotic, a fate that could befall the rest of the human race. Wald explores the complex dynamic of mimesis involved in this narrative by demonstrating how initially the alien race adopts the form and phenotype of each individual human, making an exact copy of them as well as preserving intimate knowledge about the individual's life to be used strategically. The result is a facsimile of the individual with the exception that his or her personality seems to be more mechanistic, lacking human emotion. The second aspect to this dynamic of mimicry in the story is that, in order to escape detection, humans may actually attempt to mimic the aliens by suppressing all emotion in their communication, and if they succeed in this, they will often avoid being harmed. Here, mimicry is used to *prevent* embodiment by showing that if one successfully performs the fact that he or she has already been replaced, then one no longer needs to be replaced.

This narrative of embodiment also brings up issues of evolutionary contingency that undermine notions of human exceptionalism in ecological thinking. Wald notes, "Not only does "nature" not have no special regard for human welfare, but an ecological worldview makes the eventual extinction of human beings a foregone conclusion. Facing execution at the hands of the new hybrid race, Robert Neville accepts that from their perspective the last unevolved human being is indeed an anachronism: extinction is the flip side of evolution." (203) This passage identifies how a successful evolutionary adaptation in a species, if adopted widely enough, is

difficult to differentiate from a kind of extinction, particularly from the viewpoint of those members of the species, who have not undergone the mutation in question.

What theories of evolution have taught us is that mutations favorable to environmental changes allow the possibility for the survival and proliferation of the species, meaning that fundamental changes in a species' self-similarity over long spans of time may be necessary for its continued existence. Although, if these changes are so fundamental, by certain criteria the species would, in principle, cease to be itself. In this sense, mutation (whose origins in an evolutionary sense mostly remain unknown) is what threatens the integrity (self-similarity) of the species, while simultaneously enabling it to survive. Thus, the fundamental biological openness and vulnerability to contagion simultaneously threatens, but may yet ultimately preserve, the species. From an evolutionary standpoint, self-similarity may in various cases be the enemy of continuation, even though the drive to self-preservation within a species considers anything which threatens self-similarity to be tantamount to a threat to extinction. This insight parallels one of the central theses of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,²⁴⁹ which emphasizes how a core mechanism of bourgeois survival is a strategic use of self-sacrifice (illustrated most in depth in the chapter on Odysseus) in order to preserve oneself. However, this chapter will primarily examine literary fantasies, particularly in the genre of science fiction, in which the loss of self-similarity dredges up fears of a loss of the foundations of civilization—an apocalypse suggesting a biological openness and indeterminacy.

²⁴⁹ Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1997.

This evolutionary question has been duly explored in various science fiction novels, films²⁵⁰ and short stories, such as *Darwin's Radio*,²⁵¹ in which an evolutionary mutation appears in the form of a contagion which triggers a “collective self-similarity defense.” Although, it turns out that this mutation may be a response by the species itself to new environmental pressures (also in part generated by human civilization)—an epigenetic alteration in the activation of the human genome—which threaten its fate, the story addresses an emergent xenophobia within humanity, not against foreigners, but against those who were once considered upstanding members of the society that now exhibit this new mutation. This rejection of present-day species adaptation is then also paralleled with the discovery of new archaeological evidence of *Homo Sapien's* descent from *Neanderthals*, who were shown in the novel to have reacted with fierce violence against families and their offspring who exhibited these new *Homo Sapien* characteristics. This logic is interesting because it upsets a conventional understanding of racism, in that racism here is presented as the fear and loathing within a species *of its own next generation*. This illuminates how racism may often function as a construction of otherness in what was previously perceived as an undifferentiated whole.

In all of the texts that will be addressed in this chapter, there is a particular geographical component to the experiences of transformation or embodiment, which often describe either a

²⁵⁰ Also, recent films including the likes of *District 9* (*District 9*. Dir. Neil Blomkamp. TriStar Pictures, 2009. Film), take this thematic to the extreme. In this case, the forced removal of a non-human, alien race into concentration-camp like dwellings, leads to an instance of contamination in which the main character begins to physically transform into one of the aliens. The anxiety which he experiences during this process also reflects a larger social anxiety concerning the aliens, or “Prawns,” as they are called, especially as he becomes a wanted man and is hunted by the same security agencies to which he himself once belonged. This film demonstrates that even though it is apparent that the main character’s “human” interiority has not been initially obliterated in the midst his of physical transformation, he is immediately treated as a potential threat to the rest humanity, as a kind of carrier, whose humanity is no longer of value in the face of his threat.

²⁵¹ Greg Bear. *Darwin's Radio*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1999.

heightened awareness of histories or experiences that are suppressed by a geographical order. Whether this awareness is characterized by the traumatic emergence of lost history, or the apocalyptic unveiling of mythic powers at work within modern civilization, the geographical landscape and architectural infrastructure are shown to be the substrate upon which anomalous forces leave their sinister traces but also in a way that suggests their exclusion from these very same contexts. In other words, the transformation of self into other also parallels the breakdown of a rationalistic, scientifically-buttressed infrastructural environment that excludes the appearance of history and hybridity. In these cases of a “return of the repressed,” either in the form of undefined dangers and risks of the city or as lost history, these emergences also have a contagious dimension, and appear to spread virulently. These fantasies suggest that both the eruptions of lost histories and anomalous dangers immanent to urban infrastructure are infectious and will ultimately dismantle civilization itself, if left to their own devices.

In this chapter I will focus on two novels and a film, all situated within the Southern California context. Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*²⁵² fantasizes an apocalyptic breakdown of the civilized order through the lens of atomization/suburbanization dynamics in the region’s architectural and geographical layout. The main character’s exposure to, as well as participation in, the unraveling of the social fabric, provides us with the insight that a significant part of the fear of civilizational breakdown is based in an anxiety of self transforming into other. The other novel this chapter will address is Phillip K. Dick’s *Radio Free Albemuth*,²⁵³ in which the main character experiences extra-terrestrial radio transmissions from a benevolent entity that provides him with direction in life and eventually embodies him in order to wage a world historical battle

²⁵² Octavia Butler. *Parable of the Sower*. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1993.

²⁵³ Phillip K. Dick. *Radio Free Albemuth*. New York: Avon Books, 1985.

between good and evil. In this novel, we see this thematic of the transformation of self into other, but also its obverse compliment, the masquerading of the other as self. The final text this chapter will address is the film *Nomads*²⁵⁴ which combines the themes of contagion, a return of repressed history and embodiment in such a way as to illustrate the horrific loss of self-similarity. This film also represents in quite original fashion an interesting exploration of the relationship between contagion and spectrality.



Catastrophe and the Pitfalls of Insularity in Octavia Butler's Parable of the Sower

In Butler's *Parable of the Sower*,²⁵⁵ which takes place in a futuristic Los Angeles from 2024-2027, the logic of fortified enclaves and the insulation of smaller communities against a debased population, growing everyday in its numbers and its lack of basic resources, has reached 3rd World proportions. Lauren's family lives in a walled neighborhood, Robledo, previously a picturesque suburb of Los Angeles, and the neighborhood wall is the only geographical feature which protects their way of life from criminality, extreme poverty and disease. In fact, the cordoning-off of neighborhoods, and the particular methods used to achieve this has become one of the most powerful aesthetic expressions of social class. "In fact we passed a couple of neighborhoods so poor that their walls were made up of unmortared rocks, chunks of concrete and trash. Then, there were the pitiful, unwalled residential areas. A lot of the houses were trashed—burned, vandalized, infested with drunks or druggies or squatted-in by homeless families with their filthy, gaunt, half-naked children." (10) At the outset of the novel, it is clear

²⁵⁴ *Nomads*. Dir. John McTiernan. MGM, 1986. Film.

²⁵⁵ Octavia Butler. *Parable of the Sower*. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1993.

that the protective insulation used by communities to protect their wealth, as well as their class and communal identities, has taken on a vital importance in the year 2027. While this may have always been an important aspect of 20th century metropolitan living, in the 21st century, the difference between the aesthetics of wealth and the technologies of security to protect it has become dramatically minimized. However, this does not entail that bourgeois insulation has become any less imbued with the phantoms of the world it attempts to exclude.

While Butler's novel finds most of its substance in extrapolating from contemporary phenomena (apparently she based the novel on her scrutiny of the newspaper, while nursing a broken leg for months) there are some important creative liberties she takes in setting up the story. For instance the main character, Lauren, has a particular "disorder" or peculiarity, dubbed as "hyperempathy syndrome." This syndrome is characterized by a hypersensitivity to the pain of others to the point of interfering with one's more basic survival defenses. We are introduced to Lauren's hyperempathy quite early on in the story, as well as its potentially dangerous side-effects. The introduction of this unique characteristic is also associated with certain geographical referents. While it was still necessary for family and community members to leave the neighborhood for employment and resources, these sojourns were always accompanied by firearms. Lauren's father, in the attempt to prepare her and her siblings for the unmentioned eventuality that the neighborhood wall, along with the neighborhood, might cease to exist, took his children outside the wall in order to develop their survival skills, most particularly— marksmanship. On one of these excursions, we are introduced to Lauren's (dis)ability when they encounter an injured man with a festering leg. Lauren freezes on the spot from the sheer weight of empathetic suffering, impairing her ability to remove herself from a dangerous situation.

“Hyperempathy is what the doctors call an ‘organic delusional syndrome...’ Anyway, my neurotransmitters are scrambled and they’re going to stay scrambled. But I can do okay as long as other people don’t know about me. Inside our neighborhood walls I do fine. Our rides today today were hell. Going and coming, they were all the worst things I’ve ever felt—shadows and ghosts, twists and jabs of unexpected pain. If I don’t look too long at old injuries, they don’t hurt me too much. There was a naked little boy whose skin was a mass of big red sores; a man with huge scab over the stump where his right hand used to be...” (13)

Lauren’s gift, or curse, is from the outset, associated with territory that exists outside of the scope of law and order, civilized morality and basic security. The language which she uses to describe her experience equates her own suffering with a connection to ghostly realm, situated undecidedly on the threshold between real and imagined.

The pain of others, expressed here as untreated disease and as the result of violent injury, is course, real for the actual victims, but for her, they are hallucinatory, the product of a neuro-chemical imbalance. This suggests a curious nexus between contagious disease and spectrality. Lauren does not physically have whatever diseases, contagious or not, afflict these other individuals outside the neighborhood wall, but she is nonetheless vulnerable to their contagiousness in a phenomenological sense. “The sharing isn’t real, after all. It isn’t some magic or ESP that allows me to share the pain or the pleasure of other people. It’s delusional. Even I admit that. My brother Keith used to pretend to be hurt just to trick me into sharing his supposed pain. Once he used red ink as fake blood to make me bleed. I was eleven then, and I still bled through the skin when I saw someone else bleeding.” (11) This entails a complicated phenomenological process by which perceived information from her environment is organized into various abstractions that then correspond to different types and locations of bodily pain (and pleasure). These abstractions of the pain of others, chimerical at best in their existence, are the

things which inflict pain on Lauren's own body. The pain of others is contagious to her, but not in a physical sense; rather, pain is transmitted via the work of spectrality.

As a result of her illness, Lauren is caught in a deadlock between survival at all costs and the inability to inflict any kind of pain and suffering on others, even if in self-defense, an inability shaped not so much by moral impulse (although, possibly an overactive one), but by involuntary biological response. The rest of the novel explores her survival with companions in a post-apocalyptic world and how this aspect of her character is something which threatens her survival, but on the other hand, enables her to form new social bonds and eventually develop a new religion. In some ways, this novel may be looked at as a narrativization of the emergence of new biological mutation, that initially may make it harder for its carrier to survive, but later if passed down to the next generation, would surely minimize, if not prevent, the misery and sadism of her present world. As Lauren says, "If hyperempathy syndrome were a more common complaint, people couldn't do such things. They could kill if they had to, and bear the pain of it or be destroyed by it. But if everyone could feel everyone else's pain, who would torture? Who would cause anyone unnecessary pain? I've never thought of my problem as something that might do some good before, but the way things are, I think it would help. I wish I could give it to people. Failing that, I wish I could find other people who have it and live among them. A biological conscience is better than no conscience at all." (115) Here, Lauren refers to a positive potential that could result from the spread of her affliction, and to her desire to "infect" others with it. In this light, her syndrome can be seen as biological mutation that could prove favorable to the survival of the human species if it could be passed down and widespread enough, even though it suggests a sinister enslavement to the programming of the body, which restricts human

actions before ethical questions are even raised. This desire to spread her affliction also is intimately connected to a new religion that Lauren has come up with independently, another aspect of the novel which will be explored later.

While the novel explains Lauren's mimetic syndrome as an unforeseen side-effect of a smart drug sold illegally during this period of social breakdown, it is important to address the social and communal implications of such a disorder. While the disease is often portrayed negatively as something which stands in the way of a fight or flight defense within the human organism, it also suggests that whatever community Lauren is a part of must account for this deficiency in its own strategy of self-preservation. Thus, threats against communal health and unnecessary violence will first and foremost be shunned, or at least avoided at all costs. It also, however, results in a different kind of moral economy in which the distribution of pain is something not entirely based on the private experience of the individual. This entails in the first place that Lauren, and others who share this syndrome (which in Butler's sequel *Parable of Talents*,²⁵⁶ we see that many of Lauren's community-members are also "sharers"), will automatically identify with the pain of others, but on the other hand, others without the syndrome will relate to their own pain not simply as their own matter. This is why certain characters might try in various extreme situations to hide an injury or downplay an illness. The overall moral economy which results is one in which the other must be calculated into one's most basic experiences, but not as a result of any altruistic ideology. In this case, the community's survival also depends upon an ecological relationship toward the distribution of pain. In this regard, such a disorder may also be seen as positive enabling of stronger bonds of social solidarity.

²⁵⁶ Octavia Butler. *Parable of the Talents*. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1998.

Of course, the very basis of empathy entails the suspension of self and the adoption of otherness, even if only temporarily. However, what Lauren experiences is much more extreme. She may actually be crippled by the pain of someone else's festering wound or broken leg. Thus, her syndrome is not merely an identification with the pain of others, but rather an instantaneous transmutation of self into a part-real/part-fantastic construction of the other. This transformation is also, however, a larger thematic in the story. Alongside Lauren's acquisition of skills and knowledge for survival in a dangerous world, the novel also focuses on her cultivation of a unique set of religious beliefs, scribbled in her diary next to facts about edible California plants. The principle of this religion is the inevitability, preponderance and ontological importance of change. Change and transformation, for Lauren, are the be-all and end-all of existence; while seemingly paradoxical, she describes change to be the most reliable constant in the universe that we are aware of. The book begins with a passage from Lauren's work *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*, "All that you touch, You Change/ All that you Change, Changes you/ The only lasting truth, Is Change/ God, Is Change." (3) By identifying God to be "Change," Lauren's system of thought goes fundamentally against that of her father, a Baptist minister, whose religion is, of course, based in the Christian notion of a transcendent God, which may govern, influence, yet however, fundamentally remain beyond the historical process.

Except for moments of "Theophany," in which a supreme being makes itself visible to humanity in a given historical moment, Christianity, in most of its incarnations requires the presupposition of transcendence for all other tenets of the faith. For Lauren's fledgling religion, the core precept cannot be regarded as a transcendent entity; although, "Change," when divorced from its particular occasions and generalized across the phenomenal world, does in some sense

appear beyond the reach of its phenomenal circumstances. But it appears, from her depictions, that it is more appropriate to view Lauren's God as a universal constant, akin to gravity in Physics, than as a will separate from the occasions of its actualization. In her words, "We do not worship God. We perceive and attend God. We learn from God. With forethought and work, We shape God. In the end, we yield to God. We adapt and endure, For we are Earthseed And God is Change." (17) This passage demonstrates that the perception of God, for one, is possible, and two, that perception supplants what would normally be worship in other religions. Also, this indicates that, although one must "yield to God" in the end, God can also be shaped and manipulated by human action.

It is interesting to see how much Lauren's philosophy emphasizes transformation as a constant, inexorable truth, especially considering the unstable circumstances of her childhood in Robledo. All of the infrastructure of her community appears as a superficial attempt to preserve a form of life in a world in which the future existence of the greater civilization is questionable at best. It also appears that avoidance of change or the inability to perceive it in its emergence is part of what makes change so potentially catastrophic. If change can be shaped, in a similar fashion as one must adapt to it in order to persist, this would entail a different kind of generalized epistemology. It seems that part of what Lauren is referring to by the term "Change" is also a break with the familiar, and in some sense is a direct experience with the unfamiliar, which at the onset is perceived as threat because it displaces to varying degrees that which is familiar. In this sense, change will always remain anomalous, resistant to categories of explanation because the unfamiliar always carries an irreducible trace of something undefinable within the given epistemological system. However, in Lauren's system, change is not otherworldly, it is not an

horrific externality that periodically attacks earth and its inhabitants. Rather, change is immanent to all phenomena, and in many cases, it simply means a becoming of what already is there. What I mean by this is simply that the changes illustrated in the novel which make the collapse of American civilization tangible are fundamentally not new: poverty, security, segregation, unsanitary conditions, areas somehow dangerously outside the rule of law, etc. are already a significant part of the imaginary of metropolitan Los Angeles, along with many other cities in the nation and the world. However, these changes only take on the force of real, threatening change, when they *change* the individuals involved. Thus, part of what insulation is, in terms of class and security, is simply the avoidance of being “changed by Change.”

This dynamic is characterized by a fundamental disjunction between the composition of the practical conditions in which characters live, and their modes of perceiving these very conditions. Through the lens of this disjunction, it becomes easier to envision how the *secrecy* of material truths may also be a material factor in the composition of social reality. The very practices of producing secrecy, often performed through the boundary-work of a particular paradigm, must be thought together with the normative practices whose nature is, in part, structurally veiled. Because of this boundary-work, the emergence of what is “secret,” its “apocalypse,” can only come in the form of an anomalous, externalized force (which is most often destructive), as there are no available epistemological categories with which to apprehend its radical otherness. Here, we can see a dialectic of the apocalyptic: the destructive capacity of a given civilization is latent within its very constitution, which means that its inability, willfully or epistemologically, to comprehend this fact is itself an attribute of this latent capacity; however, when an event, or set of events actually brings this assemblage of latent features to the surface, it

can only be perceived as something horribly exterior. This dialectic, however, continues: because what is catastrophic is essentially anomalous and cannot be grasped using normative epistemological categories, the catastrophic can only appear in a phantasmatic guise, some mask borrowed from a civilizational archive which hides, as well as expresses, this moment of radical otherness. I also believe that in this novel there is a strong ontological similarity between the chimerical constructions of others' pain that plague Lauren's body, as a result of her syndrome, and the existence of these phantasmatic constructions which simultaneously express and exclude the traumatic content of the anomalous.

This dialectic also pertains quite directly to a civilization's relationship with its own history, especially in regard to how this history "appears." The appearance of what is conceived to be historical is often heavily managed and controlled (in both a political and epistemological sense), or, to be more precise, monumentalized. The monumentalization of history is not simply an innocent process whereby a culture selectively seizes the "useful" elements of its heritage, and continually re-broadcasts them to itself and to following generations, suturing the filaments of its identity into a temporal construct of self-similarity. This process is often much more insidious, as well as hygienic. The moments of radical otherness which emerge in the construction and alteration of civilizational dynamics must either be safely narrativized into a collectively ratified framework of understanding, stripping them of essential shades of their historical character, or suppressed altogether from a culture's archival memory. The work of monumentalization serves to expel or quarantine certain aspects of history that pose a particular threat to, or carry within them some diagnostic truth about, the civilization in its past and/or present mode of existence.

However, another kind of history which falls outside the scope of monumentality is history that can be more easily understood as a cumulative phenomenon because its actual instances are so everyday that their historical importance is difficult to justify. Accumulations of everyday activity to the point where they reach a dangerous potential or critical mass do not fit neatly into the singular categories offered by a monumental approach. Thus, the historical antecedents of the traumatic destruction of Lauren's neighborhood are not nearly so discrete and singularly powerful as the event itself. Inequalities in wealth distribution and the erosion of an effective security force to maintain order appear to be the causes of this event, but these causes require a form of representation to convey their quantitative magnitude in order to demonstrate their value as historical determinants of this Southern California apocalypse. Once this kind of history becomes visible, the ignored part of everyday history, it also demonstrates its radical entanglements with the present world, appearing to rapidly spread into new areas even though it may really already be there.²⁵⁷ If this kind of submerged history returns to the phenomenal world, it is often figured as toxic, with the capacity to contaminate not only our comfortable vignettes of a "mythical" cultural heritage, but also the present organization of our civilization. It is in this manner that history itself, when it has not been sanitized, actually begins to resemble what we would usually term "disease."

The peculiar property of contagious disease inheres within the dynamic between itself and its host victim. After affliction, the afflicted in part *becomes* the affliction, and in turn, a potential *afflicter*. This logic of embodiment demonstrates that history as it "returns" from the

²⁵⁷ A parallel to such an emergence of lost history could be a situation in which the "tripping man" in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* is forced see how his recurrent loss of motor control is a result of processes occurring inside of him and not in the external world. Such a situation is uncanny because one must see oneself as other.

past to the present must embody, “infect” or assume some form from the present in order to express itself. What is meant by the term history also encompasses everyday actions that quietly accumulate even though in their singularity they might be of little importance, but as a critical mass, they can often emerge catastrophically. At this point, some aspect of the present set of conditions seems to be contaminated by some otherworldly presence, and is therefore a threat either to our livelihood or to how we understand ourselves. The uncanny appearance of the contamination takes the form of a *symptom*, but this apparent symptom also becomes the site upon which much larger anxieties are deposited, anxieties which can only express themselves through some fantasmic register. As Slavoj Žižek quotes in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*²⁵⁸ from Eric Santner’s unpublished article: “They [symptoms] hold the place of something that is *there*, that *insists* on our life, though it has never achieved full ontological consistency. Symptoms are thus in some sense the virtual archives of voids—or, perhaps, better, defenses against voids—that persist in historical experience.” (22) In other words, these virtual expressions of the ontologically indeterminate take on a *spectral* status.

In order to deepen our understanding of this dynamic between history and appearance, it may prove helpful to borrow from Bruno Latour’s²⁵⁹ framework concerning the modern separation between nature and culture. The modern constitution consists in the development of epistemological categories, based in a firm separation between what is natural and what is cultural, which apprehend features of the world as distinctly one or the other. In order to explain the dynamics of this modern constitution, Latour utilizes two framing concepts: purification and hybridity. Hybridity entails an essential mixing of what is deemed both natural and cultural into

²⁵⁸ Slavoj Žižek. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. London: Verso, 2002.

²⁵⁹ Bruno Latour. *We Have Never been Modern*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

forms which cannot be reduced simply to one pole or the other. The production of hybridity, in his explanation, in no way ceases or decreases under the conditions of modernity; rather, these conditions, which in part make hybridity conceptually unavailable, allow for the rampant “over-production” of hybrids directly as a result of their evasion of all epistemological grasp. While this separation is essentially false in Latour’s perspective, his other concept, purification, describes precisely the work of this separation. According to his argument, modernity may actually be characterized by an overproduction of nature/culture hybrids that occur precisely because our frames of knowledge are based in the logic of purification, which essentially distills certain features of a hybrid entity into a manageable, characterizable set that excludes other essential components which do not fit into that particular discourse.

However, in the case of disease outbreaks, we find that this firm separation no longer holds in its stringency. When an individual is infected by a contagious disease, he or she is no longer treated as solely a member of “culture” with a corresponding set of rights and social practices; rather, he or she is also treated as a carrier, a host, a site of infection itself, as a member of the non-human community of the disease. In other words, disease-inflicted individuals must be viewed as both carriers of nature and of culture simultaneously, as hybrid embodiments of both human and non-human agency. An individual must be rehabilitated insofar as he or she is cultural and quarantined insofar as he or she is natural. This suggests that disease may be a figure through which we can see the emergence of a breakdown within the modern constitution—where the “breakdown” embodies the repressed, hybrid dimension of modernity—a breakdown which allows the practices of purification to show themselves not simply as knowledge structures, but

as discursive-practices (i.e. martial law), and hence to reveal their more practical and *political* nature.

What is also interesting about the trope of disease is that disease is not always visible, and if it is, its visibility assumes the form of symptoms, which express the possible presence of some condition, but also demonstrate the impossibility of the condition coming into complete visibility. These symptoms supply the only information as to the existence and nature of the disease. But when the disease is history itself, then what are the symptoms? What form does the symptom take? Does it borrow a form of the present or rather drape itself in the garments of the past? Or more radically, does it assume the form of something as of yet not in existence, which can only be filtered through something already known? Slavoj Zizek, in his *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*,²⁶⁰ illustrates this process through the events of September 11:

We should therefore invert the standard reading according to which the WTC explosions were the intrusion of the Real which shattered our illusory sphere: quite the reverse—it was before the WTC collapse that we lived in our reality, perceiving Third World horrors...as something which existed (for us) as a spectral apparition on the (TV) screen—and what happened on September 11 was that this fantasmatic screen apparition entered our reality (i.e. the symbolic coordinates which determine what we experience as reality.) (17)

In this explanation, we see that the rupturing agent of our symbolic universe is actually a spectral, fantasmatic embodiment of our recent imperial history. Although the proportions of this catastrophic event took on an otherworldly (Real) status for most of its viewers, it actually appeared through an “historical” guise (in the uncanny sense that “we have seen this happen before” in film or other fictional expressions), a mask which also delivered the event. Zizek

²⁶⁰ Slavoj Zizek. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. London: Verso, 2002.

continues further: “The Real which returns has the status of a(nother) semblance: *precisely because it is real, that is, on account of its traumatic/excessive character, we are unable to integrate it into (what we experience as) our reality, and are therefore compelled to experience it as a nightmarish apparition.*” (19) From this argument, it seems that the horribly real of the catastrophic must draw upon some spectral entity in order to appear, but what is the historical status of this specter, and what kind of hybrid dynamics does it allude to?

The specter marks the presence of the unassimilable, an ontologically indeterminate hybrid of human and non-human properties that is *afflicted* by the condition of *haunting*, which essentially means that it may only reproduce its own logic over and over again—its disease is also its endless repetition. When a specter has the opportunity to appear, the Sisyphian work of haunting, done quietly and invisibly in some historical abyss, suddenly becomes material. The persistence of self-reduplication at a standstill suddenly, when allowed to appear, becomes a contagion of potentially pandemic proportions. A specter not only transmits its own formal content, it also transmits its repressed condition (which is essentially the exclusion from the movement of history), insinuating itself into the interstices of natural/cultural reality which the modern edifice has tried to purify. During the events of September 11, these innocent televisions, our non-partisan, non-human mediators, seemed to behave differently, as if plagued by some disease, whose only symptom is the repeated “itch” of a crumbling skyscraper.

The spectral dimensions of the destruction of infrastructure are also explored in Butler’s novel. Lauren’s neighborhood is protected by a walled enclosure to keep out looters, sadists, and people who start fires for pleasure. However when this wall is destroyed by a battering ram and many community-members are killed, the surviving residents are forced to become the very

people that they were protecting themselves against. Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*²⁶¹ is interesting precisely because it addresses the transition of the figuration of disaster as other to its figuration as self, illustrating the process of a mimetic contagion of symptoms. This illustration serves both as a diagnostic of this logic of the catastrophic in the cultural imaginary, as well as a "literary symptom" of it. This modality of infection in the story (from other to self) is also fundamentally geographical. Those inside the walled-neighborhood judge those outside as dejected shells of humanity who live in a disoriented state beneath human morality. Lauren explains: "Crazy to live without a wall to protect you...Worse for me, they have things wrong with them. They cut off each other's ears, arms and legs...They carry untreated diseases and festering wounds. They have no money to spend on water to wash with so even the unwounded have sores." (Butler 9) Already, those outside the wall are figured as psychologically unstable, and as unclean carriers of disease, even if they are unwounded. For Lauren, the wall is at once a geographical signifier of what it keeps at bay and barrier against this horrific outside. But once this wall is broken, the surviving characters soon realize that they may be forced to engage in the same kind of behavior (looting, killing, theft) as those previously labeled as "outside" or as Lauren says, "*I am one of the street poor now. Not as poor as some, but homeless, alone, full of books and ignorant of reality.*" (156) or "*So, in the company of five strangers, I plundered my family's home.*"

These characters, who originally live a more insulated existence, represent the opposite pole of the fire brigands who receive sexual pleasure from arson. This group, while engaging in a destructive frenzy also liberates private property for the looting of the masses; this orgy of

²⁶¹ Octavia Butler. *Parable of the Sower*. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1993.

destruction is also a “redistribution” of wealth in that it disrupts the tie to its previous owner, possibly killing the owner. “‘She died for us,’ the scavenger woman had said of the green face. Some kind of insane burn-the-rich movement, Keith had said. We’ve never been rich, but to the desperate, we looked rich. We were surviving and we had our wall. Did our community die so that addicts could make a help-the-poor political statement?” (163) This group can be figured as one symptom (the human part) of a kind of “disease” which infects and literally destroys neighborhoods by conflagration (the non-human part), roving into new areas as well as integrating new members into its sphere (Fire brings them into new areas, and they bring fire into new areas. This group is definitely a hybrid assemblage of human and non-human agency). While this “disease” of nature/culture hybridity marks the end of Southern California civilization as we know it, it also functions an emergence of a repressed history of exclusion and segregation.

In his *The History of Forgetting*,²⁶² Norman Klein describes how the images used to advertise the city of Los Angeles in the earlier part of the 20th century did not include the individuals who were necessary for the actual manufacture of the infrastructure of the city. While booster campaigns tended to focus their attentions on the wealthy and infirm, there was clearly a need to import labor to build such a city based on images of paradise, images which fundamentally excluded the people who would labor to make these dreams a reality.

The hype of tourist advertising also brought the hucksters so much associated with the hard edge of Los Angeles: storefront dreamers, white-collar swindlers, and gambling rings. But these sins were also forgiven as rule, not legislated away. They were essentially bad eggs (white, but a little too hard-boiled), not serious enough to turn off investors... What presented a far greater risk, it was felt, was the location of slums, where the less white and the less middle-class lived. Some of

²⁶² Norman Klein. *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory*. New York and London: Verso, 1997.

these slums emerged out of boosterism itself, as necessary for growth. Agribusiness, oil, and the trolley industry campaigned by flyer to bring in Mexicans, Japanese, landless farm workers from the Midwest—the cheap labor require to assemble this leviathan. Slums represented the highest negatives for the well-heeled tourists who came to stay, and had to be zoned out sight in some way. But they never disappeared entirely, not when so much activity was bursting at once. As a result, the grand booster campaign built two social imaginaries, not only the protestant Jerusalem, but also the sinful tourist Babylon. (29)

Considering the fact the actual referent for these images had not yet been built, the city also had to import the means of production to realize this image. This meant particularly a mass of cheap, immigrant labor, whose non-unionized status kept them powerless against the power-brokers of the incipient city. This importation of people not as consumers of the California dream, but rather as its builders, led to the erection of urban tenements which fundamentally went against the very image of the city they were in the process of constructing. But, of course, the major boosters of this campaign would not adjust the image of city to include these new “dangerous” elements, nor would they provide individuals with the financial means to “live in the image.” As stated above, this contradiction between the image and the actual economy it represented, yet also administered, led to the production of another social imaginary—one of moral turpitude, poverty and crime. It is this imaginary, whose origins lie in the fallout of the first, which provides the backdrop for LA’s apocalyptic literature. These elements of the second must be understood first and foremost as excluded from, yet necessary to, the first, but in the second, it is their exclusion itself—precisely because they are the appearance of something that cannot be managed by the first image, as it has no category for them—which takes fantastical form.

Klein shows that the rhetoric of disease was actually used frequently in condemning these impoverished areas of the city to re-zoning or demolition. Terms such “blight” and “fever”

referred to the decrepit slum buildings in which many poorer sectors of the community had to dwell, but this rhetoric also suggested a fear of contamination on the part of city planners. “Despite the rude oversimplifications, many of these models were designed to address the problems of poorer struggling neighborhoods; and influenced plans for public housing in the forties. But consider what the model suggests: buildings are the host victims, and therefore alive; poor residents are only *part* of the corpus...” (40) The logic of disease in this rhetoric is quite telling. The infrastructure of the city is part of its image, and it is allowed to appear as such. However, when elements of this image/infrastructure are “sick”—contaminated by some nebulous architectural illness—we are only left with phantasmatic agents (often figured as the “others” who occupy these buildings) as the culprit because we lack a paradigm to apprehend the appearance of our actual history and of the fallout of our imaginary. The next step in this process is of course the demonization of foreigners, non-whites and members of the lower, laboring classes in general. This process culminates in a policy where the buildings are renovated or rebuilt, while their inhabitants are forced out of the neighborhood because of a rise in property values, an early form of gentrification. Here, the specters of racial mixing and class warfare are deposited onto the symptom of “sick buildings,” giving the anomalous (i.e. historical) disease its unnerving parameters. In this sense the by-products and embodiments of real Los Angeles history come to appear in the popular imaginary as a “symptoms of disease” which could dangerously infect the rest of the city.

In *Parable of the Sower*,²⁶³ the hybrid complex of the pyro-gangs and the looters also represents the emergence of a repressed history of Los Angeles by the fact that their consumption

²⁶³ Octavia Butler. *Parable of the Sower*. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1993.

of the spectacle of fire is achieved through a destruction of the suburban image of the city whose excluded builders of the past live on as unredeemed specters in the “horde” of “teeming” masses. (It is however interesting to note that the neighborhood wall is simultaneously part of the image and its protector). These arsons allowed dispossessed individuals, those who inherit the legacy of those who produced the image of city but who were excluded from it, to occupy its space and reclaim whatever wealth it contained. This dynamic is apocalyptic in the directly etymological sense because the fires actually tarnish the imaginary which keeps the two worlds separate; they are “revelations” that the dejected masses are already to be found in the very architecture of LA’s suburban utopia—however, the text suggests that in order to destroy the image, one must also destroy the architecture, baby and bathwater alike.

It is also interesting to note that the catastrophe pre-exists the main character’s direct experience with it. Lauren remains insulated from its violence (except in moments where her hyperempathetic abilities are activated on bicycle rides outside the wall), with a few exceptions, until the walls are broken down. This suggests that part of what is properly catastrophic is also *the insulation from* the catastrophic. However, Lauren’s syndrome makes her deficient in the regards to the production and maintenance of this insulation. While insulation, in terms of class, infrastructure and psychological modes of human dwelling, emerged in the 20th century as a cornerstone of bourgeois society, enabling certain classes to thrive, here, it appears as the very weakness of modern civilization. It is also in part because of Lauren’s inability to feel sufficiently insulated that she is able to survive after the edifice of that insulation has been destroyed.

These houses of Robledo, probably more run-down and dilapidated than most suburbs of the present, received representations of “news” from the “outside” from large screens within the houses, until they eventually ceased to function. This technology of distance serves to insulate subjects from a cruel world while simultaneously giving them access to it. This is the form that “history” is actually allowed to take, the safe representation of things from afar which appear up close. The insulation from the catastrophic is catastrophic itself precisely insofar as it masks the presence of the catastrophic, projecting it onto an exterior universe and enabling its continuation. On a similar note, Lauren’s description of the neighborhood wall is not as a protective edifice: “The neighborhood wall is a massive, looming presence nearby. I see it as a crouching animal, perhaps about to spring, more threatening than protective.” (5) Here, the wall itself is imaginatively imbued with all the dangers which lurk beyond it.

The wall and the Window Wall television screen have a curious homology: they are both are imbued with what they exclude. However, the one, one can assume, provides formal imagistic contours for “spectral monsters” to appear, while the other can only excite them in the imagination because it serves as a material depository for many social anxieties. Thus, the slippage here between screen (window) and wall (barrier) becomes acute in the traumatic moment when the front gate of the neighborhood is knocked down. Do the inhabitants of neighborhood perceive this event in a manner similar to zombies coming through the television screen? Does this represent the point at which marginalized specters come to contaminate the “living” by entering their insulated universe in the very draperies of that insulation (like the cliché of the ghost draped in bedsheets, the very material barriers we use to protect ourselves from our nightmares). When we see this insulation break down or more precisely, burn to the

ground, we see that what erupts out of this fissure are two sets of contagious semiotic symptoms expressed through and attached to human bodies. The first symptom is articulated through the pyro gang which seems to grow in membership and spread in geographical space. “People are setting fires to get rid of whomever they dislike from personal enemies to anyone who looks or sounds foreign or racially different... Then there’s that fire drug with it’s dozen or so names: blaze, fuego, flash, sunfire... the most popular name is Pyro—short for pyromania. It’s all the same drug, and its been around for a while... it makes watching the leaping, changing patterns of fire a better, more intense, longer-lasting high than sex.” (128) Here we can see that this fire drug spreads according to patterns of contagion.

On the one hand, people have begun to use fire to combat those conceived as an enemy or other, the usual site upon which all social problems are deposited, figured as something external to the social order. This setting of small individual fires in a region such as Southern California can easily turn into a great blaze because of its highly flammable flora. When this greater fire is then apprehended, it is also seen as something ungodly visiting the world from somewhere else, even though it is fundamentally caused by angry mobs of “citizens” fighting against one another. On the other hand, we have the fire drug which has many different names and contexts. As we will see later on in the story, these “pyro” users have a kind of gang with its own particular aesthetic of face-painting, and gyrating gesticulations. They spread throughout the city causing an aggregation of painted faces and large-scale fires. Also, they come with the looters (and vice-versa), a whole other mass of people who share a similar homeless appearance with all their belongings attached to themselves, living in abjectly unhygienic conditions. These two groups have a kind of symbiotic relationship that enables the numbers from each group to increase after

a new neighborhood is attacked and looted. The survivors will generally be forced to join the mass of looters or die. It is unclear how new individuals are brought into the pyro gang, but it does seem as though their own pyro-activity actually produces more potential converts to their drug-induced fire-starting.

In other words, each of the groups can be perceived as symptoms of a larger, non-descript “disease” that continues to grow by spreading. But these symptoms are also strange hybrids, made up of both nature and culture. The catastrophe which spreads across Los Angeles comes in the form of fire, looters and fire-junkies. With pyro-users it is difficult to separate their spread and existence from the existence and spread of fire itself; they are essentially a human/non-human cluster that is “out of control.” The other group is also a kind hybrid; their rags after extensive time spent outdoors will possess more or less the same kind gray of colors from repeated contact with the dirtier surfaces of the city. Their countenances seem to convey the abject environments in which they must live. Also, this same group gains a significant amount of its wealth from looting houses that the pyro-people have destroyed, meaning that they too are involved in this hybrid cluster. Once there is crack in the wall of the neighborhood, one is forced to be integrated into one group (expressing its dominant idiom or symptom) or the other, and each vector has its own agenda: to expand and survive, like a disease. What this indicates is that highly secure insulation on some level provides a higher possibility for the minute disruptions to assume catastrophic proportions—a heightened degree of insecurity.

In his *Dead Cities*,²⁶⁴ Mike Davis addresses how urban fabrications of bourgeois security not only provide a substrate for the projection of cultural and civilizational anxieties, but also

²⁶⁴ Mike Davis. *Dead Cities*. New York: New Press, 2002.

increase the vulnerability of this mode of life to a range of calamities. In a discussion of the Uncanny and Ernst Bloch's writings on urban ecology, he writes:

In the "Americanized big city," by contrast, the quest for the bourgeois utopia of totally calculable and safe environment has paradoxically generated radical insecurity (*unheimlich*). Indeed, "where technology has achieved an apparent victory over the limits of nature...the coefficient of known and, more significantly, unknown danger has increased proportionately." In part, this is because the metropolis's interdependent technological systems—as Americans discovered in fall 2001—have become "simultaneously so complex and so vulnerable." More profoundly, the capitalist big city is "extremely dangerous" because it dominates rather than cooperates with nature...The Uncanny is precisely that "nothingness [non-integration with nature] that stands behind the mechanized world." Although Bloch was acutely aware of the imminent dangers of fascism and a new world war, he insisted that the deepest structure of urban fear is not Well's war in the air, but "detachment and distance from the natural landscape." (italics and brackets from the original, 8)

This analysis indicates the primacy of a bourgeois drive for security. This drive, as expressed in the complete administration of urban space and its attendant space of appearance, is based in some "non-integration with nature," a refusal to take the natural landscape into account when building urban infrastructure. By keeping nature "bracketed," however, we find our infrastructure much more vulnerable to nature's minute changes. Our infrastructure, which purifies itself from its "natural" context, is a major site of cultural anxiety precisely because it represses its material intimacy with "nature." Thus, when some breakdown in an urban system does occur, this can take on catastrophic proportions, affecting or infecting spheres previously thought to be unrelated to site of the breakdown.

However, this “non-integration with nature,” that which underpins the infrastructural design of bourgeois civilization, may be a more complicated matter than simple ecological negligence. A possibly more radical interpretation of this non-integration is that integration with nature is a phenomenon so vast and refined in the modern city that it can only be grasped as “non-integration.” The multitude of technologies which mediate between humans and their environments is so vast that we could not possibly hope to “see” all of the ways in which we are integrated with nature. This means that our paradigm is simply not integrated into the hybrid world it has helped to erect. Thus, our urban infrastructure is the paradigmatic screen upon which our hybrid world asserts its otherness in spectral form, and the modern insulation which infuses this infrastructure monumentalizes and purifies (includes by excluding) the world of hybrids of which it is composed. When a crack in this infrastructure emerges, the unclassifiable hybrids invade the world of perceived reality in their spectral clothing and continue their haunting in the form of mimetic contagion, revealing all the other, smaller cracks in the urban edifice and inhabiting or “infecting” them.



Infrastructural Apocalypse and Embodiment in Philip K. Dick's Radio Free Albemuth

“Being politically oriented, Nicolas had already noted the budding career of the junior senator from California, Ferris F. Fremont, who had issued forth in 1952 from Orange County, far to the south of us, an area so reactionary that to us in Berkeley it seemed a phantom land, made of the mists of dire nightmare, where apparitions spawned that were as terrible as the real—more real than if they have been composed of solid reality.” (15)

In Phillip K. Dick's *Radio Free Albemuth*,²⁶⁵ the thematic of the transformation of self into other is also central to the story; however, this element is also often coupled with another dynamic that can be characterized as *the masquerading of the other as self*. The story revolves around the transformation of Nicolas Brady, a bay-area transplant who moved to Orange County after receiving communications from an extra-terrestrial satellite frequency. As the story progresses and the communications between this quasi-divine entity and Nicolas increase in frequency and intensity, we learn that these interactions, which would often occur in Nicolas's dreams or periodic trans-like states, do not simply concern the transmission of divine information. Rather, these transmissions were also "re-programming" and transforming Nicolas into another being, a being who would take his post in a world-historical battle between good and evil to be waged in the end times.

What is interesting about the narration and its approaches to processing this anomaly is also the fact that the author Phillip K. Dick is also a main character in the story, Nicolas's best friend, who always attempts to provide science-fiction interpretations of these strange phenomena affecting his friend. This type of interpretative narration actually comprises the bulk of the story, or at least Part 1, which is from the perspective of Phillip K. Dick and aptly entitled "Phil." However, as the interpretations begin to settle, what seems to be science fiction starts to appear more like what could be considered "Born-Again Religion," meaning that in the strictest sense some kind of omnipotent god enters the body of one of its human creations, transforming it from the inside out, as if it were to be reborn, so to say. It is also interesting to note that mode through which this rebirth process takes place, according to various branches of evangelical

²⁶⁵ Phillip K. Dick. *Radio Free Albemuth*. New York: Avon Books, 1985.

Christianity, requires an openness to the reception of the “Word of God.” In both the story and born-again belief systems, communication is the precondition, yet also the mode, of transformation.

Another aspect of Nicolas’s transformation is the kind of perspectival shift of such proportion that it even alters his experience of temporality and his position within the larger historical process. Nicolas begins to see his own historical situation in the early seventies in conservative suburb of Orange County as a veneer which hides the truth that the year is actually 167 AD during the Roman Empire, a time in which most of the population is enslaved to the tyranny of an entity that Nicolas refers to as the “Iron Prison.”²⁶⁶ The story also takes place during the reign of reactionary president Ferris F. Fremont, a kind of fictional hybrid between Nixon and McCarthy, who manages to place the entire country under the chokehold of anti-communist paranoia. As Nicolas begins to experience these transmissions with greater frequency and intensity, at a certain point his spatio-temporal perspective is almost entirely unseated by that of an embodied other. This other who comes to awaken within Nicolas sees the external landscape not as a collection of suburban enclaves with Disneyland as its spiritual center, but rather as the architecture of imperial Rome in 167 AD. This perspectival shift at first begs the comparison between an insulated geographical order under the dictatorship of a reactionary tyrant, and the oppressive system of the Roman empire. However, this experience for Nicolas does not seem to be an instance of an “historical hallucination” in which the repressed antecedents of the current arrangement of present times reappear with their appropriate prominence. Rather, this experience is more ontological in nature in that the entirety of world-

²⁶⁶ See *The Exegesis of Philip K Dick*. ed. Pamela Jackson and Jonathan Lethem. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011.

history since the days of classical empire appears to be an enormous hallucination. What this job of historical enlightenment affords Nicolas is the ability to see that the infrastructure of everyday life is actually a veneer for an entity masquerading as our human collective organization, another masquerading as self. Thus, Nicolas's hallucinations in the novel rather must be examined as an antidote or interference for a collective hallucination that keeps humanity enslaved to an unknown, yet diabolical enemy.

This spatio-temporal "hallucination" is also important because of its historical claims.

I did not feel that it was matter of my returning to a former life, of moving backward in time to some past existence. *Rome was here now*; it had invaded the landscape, rising up from within it, manifesting itself from its centuries-long place of inner concealment. Rather than me being back in an ancient world, Rome had revealed itself as the underlying reality of our present-day world...My memory had become elongated, stretching out over a span of two-thousand years, but what it encountered was dreadful sameness: Rome lay spread out everywhere across the ages. What a giant entity it was, to extend that far in time. There lay no relief from it either in the past or in the present, although in a sense I experienced no past, just a continual present of vast immensity. (117)

In this case, Nicolas's vision portrays the landscape not as something which masks the presence of history, but rather as something which masks the absence of history, a vast continual present that has managed to perpetuate itself for roughly two-thousand years.

This scene also adheres to the definition of an apocalypse in which some entity that veils a true reality in which characters live is removed, allowing the truth of material conditions to emerge. This apocalyptic geography of Southern California perpetually hides the fact that a supernatural entity is secretly oppressing the human race, but also in such a way that the human species perceives itself as possessing a diachronic existence, when really it is imprisoned within a never-ending era, in a mythic time devoid of temporal gradation. This scene also recalls

Freder's experience of a large-scale industrial accident in *Metropolis*.²⁶⁷ This scene is also an apocalyptic revelation that shows what underlies the infrastructure of industrial toil to be an insatiable mythic entity who feeds on human sacrifice. In both scenes, infrastructure appears to be possessed or haunted by specters that are incommensurable with rationalized scientific perception, and only seem to emerge when there is a breakdown in the functioning of this infrastructure. But while it may not be possible to grant validity to the supernatural existence of specters, I would like to entertain the notion they provide imagistic and atmospheric coordinates for something more difficult to represent, namely the statistical accumulation of everyday processes, composed of individual acts which in themselves do not amount to much. But when taken cumulatively, they become a legitimate force, even though it is not possible to represent this force in a realistic manner. For this, one requires mythic realism to represent the power inherent within statistical aggregates. The human sacrifice to Moloch, the ghost in M-Machine, is capable of accurately representing the accumulated force of everyday human labor supplying the industrial machine. One requires myth to accurately portray a reality defined by industrial accumulation. The "Iron Prison" is similarly a mythic concatenation of suburban oppression which demonizes otherness.

This kind of fantasy is one which has often appeared in literature and film within the science fiction genre, most notably in *They Live*,²⁶⁸ in which after the main characters realize that a conspiracy is underway, they find special sunglasses which allow them to see that certain members of the population actually resemble corpse-like aliens that aim to control and exploit the human race. These sunglasses also afford the characters a vantage point on their current

²⁶⁷ *Metropolis*. Dir. Fritz Lang. Ufa, 1927. Film.

²⁶⁸ *They Live*. Dir. John Carpenter. Alive Films, 1988. Film.

geography, in which advertisements gracing the sides of skyscrapers are actually commands to “obey” and remain quiescent in the face of a generalized tyranny. This fantasy, in wonderful B-movie fashion then compels the main character to arm himself and take action against the members of this conspiracy who are in fact “walking among us,” sleepers who behave like normal citizens, but who really are working to subjugate humanity. The main character proceeds to shoot them down with a shotgun, which we see through his glasses. However, if we were to imagine how this would appear from the standpoint of those without glasses, it is clear that the character’s action would be perceived simply as random acts of maniacal violence perpetrated indiscriminately on the population at large. With this in mind, it is also important to envision a scenario in which the vast majority of citizens were provided with such glasses, and where this might lead.

In Dick’s novel, the critical fantasy of 70’s southern California as draconian empire, also has its counterpart. The very entity, dubbed VALIS by Nicolas, which embodies him through satellite communication also provides him with a foil to this phantasmic portrayal of evil. “And now, in our midst at this latter time, the old battle continued on, the oppressor lying behind the iron body, striking at those who were not expressions of the empire—ourselves who served a King, and walked other ways. We wore no armor, no metal, only the robes, sandals and perhaps a golden fish in bracelet or necklace form...Many of us had fallen already, to awaken later when the King returned...How soon would it be? Soon, but not yet. And when he returned he would teach at the periphery of the empire but would strike at its source, its heart...this appearance of the King would be quite a surprise, quite a shock to the tyrant...”²⁶⁹ Alongside Nicolas’s fantasy

²⁶⁹ Phillip K. Dick. *Radio Free Albemuth*. New York: Avon Books, 1985. p. 117

of absolute trans-historical oppression we also have a fantasy of absolute deliverance, a liberation that is predestined to occur at some point in the near future, even though the true reality underpinning all things is apparently a kind of perpetual present. This fantasy is a quintessential Born-again Christian fantasy, in which one opens oneself to embodiment by the holy spirit, who will speak through him and provide him with the true vision. The “King” in this case is, of course, Jesus who returns not as a simple peasant, but as a warrior-king to restore the earth to its true nature after an eternity of corruption by Satanic forces. “Born again. A fresh, new entity entirely. Born again into completeness. With faculties and functions I had never had, which were lost, stripped away, in the original Fall. Stripped away, not from me as an individual; stripped away from our race.” (119)

It is this facet of Dick’s critical fantasy that I will attempt to unpack here. Initially, a character is enlightened to the fact that what he thinks is reality and the order of things is in fact the product of a vast conspiracy perpetrated by an unnamed, nebulous other which never reveals itself in its true form. However, manifestations of this diabolical other, its evil agents, will masquerade themselves as members of the afflicted population in order to achieve their sinister ends—in this case, members of the Friends of the American People, the FAPers under the leadership of the reactionary president Ferris Fremont. Because these agents have become “like us” and are indistinguishable from us, we require the correct vision and interpretation of symbols in order to identify them and root them out. The correct vision will come when we realize that we are part of a larger trans-historical force that will eventually triumph over evil. This logic is not so dissimilar from fascism, in the sense that its operational principle is the discovery and purgation of the enemy within. However, in Dick’s story, it is interesting to see that opponent of

Nicolas, VALIS, and this Christian-esque world-view is itself a totalitarian, quasi-fascist organization, built on the John Birch-esque fabric of anti-communist paranoia, an organization that by all intents and purposes appears to operate under the same principle of identification and purgation as the Christian faction.

What is interesting about the interplay between these two distillations of actual political and religious movements, namely John-Birch anti-communism and Born-Again evangelism, is each's deployment of a paranoid depiction of the other; although, in the actual history of these movements in the Southern California region, the two often ran together and were part of the same conservative league. In the same vein, individual characters like Brady and President Ferris Freemont, are also figures which destabilize the political boundaries of the community, in that each of them appears as the carrier of forces threatening to the nation, in the eyes of the other. In this story, Dick's critique of a Nixon/McCarthyist police state, whose mastermind originates in Orange County, is buttressed by a Born-Again Christian fantasy, which supplants the invisible, yet omnipresent enemy of communism with a satanic presence. In this sense, following Earl Jackson's definition, *Radio Free Albemuth* is a *critical fantasy* of suburban paranoia, which, while diagnosing the region with a high fever that integrates right-wing hallucinations into its public policy, is also itself symptomatic of the paranoid process, in that the indictment of conspiratorial forces necessarily requires a counter-hallucination which bears structural resemblance to the object of critique. Thus, Dick, in the attempt to criticize the myth-making practices of conservative ideologists and their control of Southern California erects a counter-myth that sees conservative movements as the work of Satan, aiming to take over and infect the region.

This critical fantasy also problematizes the issue of becoming-aware of social contamination, as those enlightened to the “truth” that Fremont and his henchman are actually forces originating from an otherworldly conspiracy, in their actions and perspectives, adopt, just like their enemies, the fear of contamination as driving principle. In this way, it becomes more difficult to evaluate the righteousness of one versus the other. While, as readers, we are offered much easier routes to identification with the Dick/Brady camp, and may consider their faction as a fledgling force of righteousness in a corrupt world, it is possible to see how their view of a spectralized enemy is also used by their enemy to achieve its own self-serving ends.

The defensive operation at home was titled Mission Checkup, this term having obvious medical connotations. It had to do with the basic moral health of America, Fremont explained when he directed the intelligence community to get under way. The basic premise was that antiwar sentiment sprang from a vast and secret subversive organization. President Fremont proposed to heal America of its sickness; he would destroy ‘the tree of evil,’ as he termed Aramcheck, by ‘rooting out its seed,’ a metaphor that didn’t even mix, let alone wash. ‘The seeds of the tree of evil’ were the antiwar dissidents, of whom I was one. (49)

This passage makes clear that Fremont views dissidence as a kind of communist contamination that threatens the purity of the nation.

It is here that spectrality becomes an important concept to examine the political and its space of appearance. Each of these political entities vying for the seat of hegemony within a community usually begins its campaign from a marginalized position in which “what it actually is” is condemned to a status that is “half-real” by the current power, as any true appearance of that which threatens the foundation of law is already the invalidation of this law. Thus, marginalized political power is forced into a spectral status, meaning that due to the interdiction against its appearance, it must take on a property of the apparent, sanctioned world in order to

convey itself, and to also convey the fact that all of “what it is” is not yet present, or grounded ontologically. Thus, the call for justice that a specter represents and instills is in part a call for the nullification of a “world order” which does not allow it to “be” in the fullest sense of the term. The structure of the spatio-temporal world itself is thus unjust, a corrupted “time out of joint” in which things of true value are not granted ontological consistency. But it is here that the specter comes to misrepresent itself and its enemy. While campaigning against its own exclusion, it comes to attack the ruling power, a force that happens to occupy the seat of governance, the current regime. But the “time out of joint” which excludes the specter is not identical with the ruling authority. The “time out of joint” refers to an “infrastructure” which the ruling authority inhabits and enlivens with its own agenda. The specter only appeals to openness in order to control the appearance of its competitors, not to become ontologically full itself.

In *Specters of Marx*,²⁷⁰ Derrida treats the spectral as an index of a certain temporality, or rather of a particular relationship to temporality itself—especially as a mode of figuring futurity. The apparition which designates, on the one hand, an epoch whose character is fundamentally damaged—a “time out of joint”—suggests both its supersession and redemption by an element which has no ontological grounding within it. Thus, the spectral for him is not within the purview of an ontological understanding of the time period. The spectral cannot itself be situated within the world it visits, but nonetheless must cause a situation in which the ontology of the historical moment is itself called into question. The spectral visitation, as admixture of embodied form and unrecognizable “spirit,” acts as an unredeemed figure whose call to justice has been edited out of a temporal register of life—an *epokhe*. But this very appearance of the ghost

²⁷⁰ Jacques Derrida. *Specters of Marx*. London: Routledge, 1994.

indicates a sickness within the structural order that must be addressed by someone who occupies an actual position within it—hence Derrida’s description of the task of Hamlet. Spectral politics is then the assumption of the demand for justice on the part of the non-existent or the not-yet-existent by an element within the existent moment in question—Derrida likens this to a “revolutionary calling.”

Later in the novel we learn that Nicolas has been killed by the FAPers and Phil, imprisoned for the rest of his life. During his imprisonment, the FAPers will continue Phil’s career as a science fiction author without his actual literary contributions, producing tracts of conservative political propaganda under his name. When he meets with Vivian, the young FAPER who successfully led to his imprisonment, she tells him about “his” new book, which concerns a race of hideous worms that come from outer space and burrow their way into the heads of humans. “‘What’s the moral of the book?’ I said. ‘It’s just entertainment. It has no moral. Well, it—nevermind.’ I foresaw the moral. People should not trust creatures different from themselves; anything alien, from another planet was vile and disgusting. Man was the one pure species. He stood alone against a hostile universe...probably led by his glorious Führer. ‘Is mankind saved from these blind worms?’ I asked. ‘Yes. By their Supreme Council, who are genetically higher humans, cloned from one aristocratic—’”²⁷¹ This passage is interesting because it represents the logic of purity and contamination simultaneously. In this case, the drive to purity of the FAPers, expressed in this novel, requires the authorship of Phil, the dissident seed of the tree of evil in order to be effective as propaganda. In this sense, the logic of purity requires contamination by its other in order to spread.

²⁷¹ Phillip K. Dick. *Radio Free Albemuth*. New York: Avon Books, 1985. p. 201

What this entails is that a particular group or species is not self-identical, and in fact, at some point blurred into indistinction with something other than itself in order to be what it is currently. This idea has been explored in many ways, especially by Walter Benjamin in his *Critique of Violence*.²⁷² In this text Benjamin distinguishes between different forms of violence which he identifies to be “law-preserving,” “law-creating” (mythic violence) and “diving violence.” Law-preserving violence is the mode of violence which sustains an already-existing legal order, preserving its sanctity against other forms of life which may seek to overthrow it. Law-creating violence is interesting because it precedes the founding of a given juridical order, and as such, is not subject to the very laws it gives rise to. Law-creating violence cannot be judged under the same juridical framework applied to acts that violate specific legal codes because if it were to, it is quite possible that means by which the juridical order was founded would prove to be unjust under its own laws. This is also where the figure of divine violence comes in because divine violence is supposed to be a form of violence which rejects the legal order and that may help to dissolve it. However, from a different temporal standpoint it may not be possible to truly distinguish between divine violence and mythic violence. One may just be prior to the future myth of itself.

The reason I mention this schema is to suggest a possible interpretation for why historical fissures are subject to the logic of haunting and why the return of repressed history makes this haunting contagious. Nicolas, enlightened through a spiritual embodiment, recognizes that he lives in a corrupted “time out of joint,” in which the real injustices of the past are not only hidden by the spatio-temporal order, but in fact not *really in the past* (67 AD in imperial Rome has never

²⁷² Walter Benjamin. *Reflections*. New York, Schocken Books, 1986.

actually ended) because the very spatio-temporal construction of his reality is a false one, one and the same with the injustices themselves. Nicolas's conversion, his becoming-spectral is a kind of partial "theophany," in which the "divine" power of VALIS, excluded from the historical paradigm, threatens the solidity of that paradigm with the "apocalypse" of its falsity and rotten injustice, which is why Nicolas and other dissidents are perceived as a contagion, "seeds of the tree of evil." In this sense, *the spectral is not a visitation from the past or from somewhere else altogether; but rather is the most precise expression of the status of the present within a corrupted temporality.*²⁷³ The specter is an expression of the present as it is distributed between the two absences of the "no longer" and the "not yet," and in this sense, the "to-come" within this order is intimately tied to that which has expired, or "been disappeared."

At the end of the novel, when Phil is employed during his imprisonment as a construction worker to raze old buildings to the ground in the slums of LA, he meets another dissident in his work crew, who was not part of the faction under VALIS's guidance. In this discussion, the VALIS-inspired belief system is shown clearly to be a religious idea, rather than a political movement. "'They believe,' I said, 'that we shouldn't give our loyalty to human rulers. That there is a supreme father in the sky, above the stars, who guides us. Our loyalty should be to him and him alone.' 'That's not a political idea,' Leon said with disgust. 'I thought Aramchek was a political organization, subversive.' 'It is.' 'But that's a religious idea. That's the basis of religion. They been talking about that for five thousand years.' I had to admit he was right. 'Well,' I said, 'that's Aramchek, an organization guided by the supreme heavenly father.'"²⁷⁴ This clear admission at the end of novel, indicates that the faction following VALIS is difficult to

²⁷³ See Jacques Derrida. *Specters of Marx*. London: Routledge, 1994.

²⁷⁴ Philip K. Dick. *Radio Free Albemuth*. New York: Avon Books, 1985. p.207

distinguish from a radical Christian cult. Although it may be possible that they represent a political resistance movement against tyranny, it becomes clear that the political dimension of their resistance may be secondary to the promulgation of a kind of “otherworldly philosophy” in which the true value of humanity may only be fully realized in a world beyond ours. As Leon says, “I can see you loved your two friends and you miss them, and maybe they’re flying around somewhere in the sky, zipping here and there and being spirits and happy. But you and I and three billion other people are not. And until it changes here it won’t be enough, Phil; not enough. Despite the supreme heavenly father. He has to do something for us here, and that’s the truth.” (208) Leon’s provocative statement indicates that, although the force of VALIS may embody a kind of “divine violence” in history against absolute tyranny, aiming to heal a corrupted “time out of joint” by bringing it into the “light of justice,” it appears that even if VALIS succeeds that its logic will only be partially expressed in this new world of its own making, still projecting value onto a transcendent sphere in the “heavens.” From a conservative standpoint, this could mean that the true project of VALIS is only to become the ruling idiom in a kind of political infrastructure in which its complete ontology will always remain structurally veiled.



Spectral Contagion

The last text I would like to address in this chapter is a film by director John McTiernan, an obscure, somewhat forgotten horror/suspense film from the 1980’s. Due to the fact that the film is somewhat lesser known, I will briefly summarize its major plot features. The film

*Nomads*²⁷⁵ takes place in 1980's Los Angeles and focuses on the lives of a french anthropologist Jean-Charles Pommier and his wife who have just recently moved to the city to begin a more sedentary existence after years of transient research. The film begins in a hospital with another character, Dr. Eileen Flax, a recent "east-coast" transplant, who must treat Pommier after he is brought to the emergency room, covered in blood and in a state of shock. At the end of this scene Pommier bites Dr. Flax on the neck, and then dies mysteriously, but not before repeating the enigmatic statement, "N'ils sont pas la. Des Innuats." It is discovered later that there were no drugs found in Pommier's system, as he was thought to have ingested PCP. The next day Dr. Flax has a brain hemorrhage after fainting on the job and proceeds to hear voices in her head, and soon begins to witness events from the perspective of the recently deceased Pommier, reliving his past experiences. At this point, Flax's consciousness is almost entirely overtaken by that of Pommier's, fully embodying her. The film continues from the perspective of Pommier, but inside the body of Flax, with the occasional interruptions of Flax returning to her own consciousness.

From the outset of this film we already have quite a complicated logic of temporality, infection and embodiment. By biting Flax, Pommier infects her with a particular illness that manifests itself as a visual narrative of his past experiences that then replay themselves in present tense for Flax as if they were her own. It turns out that Pommier was chasing a band of street-punks who had vandalized his house with enigmatic graffiti and who had also left behind a curious bundle of newspaper clippings in his garage, comprised of tattered articles that alluded to gruesome events somehow associated with Pommier's residence. As Pommier pursues them down the Sunset Strip and through other parts of Hollywood, we see that this group exhibits the

²⁷⁵ *Nomads*. Dir. John McTiernan. Cinema VII, 1986. Film

anti-social behavior often associated with a distorted representation of the LA punk-rocker scene during the 1980's, characterized by an utter disregard for morality and civic law, which is exemplified by scenes of reckless driving and beatings of innocent citizens. Pommier follows them for two days without sleeping, and realizes that they appear not to have a home, that they are present-day modern nomads within the heart of western civilization. What makes this even more interesting is the fact that Pommier himself is an anthropologist who specializes in the study of nomadic tribes. However, he soon realizes, after developing his photographs taken over the course of two sleepless days, that none of the members of this gang appear on any of the photographs; they remain utterly invisible. This, of course, lends a spectral dimension to the story.

After becoming more and more consumed by his desire to understand the nomads, Pommier soon realizes that the nomads have begun to hunt him, appearing and disappearing while coming into closer proximity to him. Eventually, they attack him, leading to his death, but not before, of course, he infects Flax with both the capacity to see the nomads and to relive his experiences. After escaping the hospital in a deranged state, Flax emerges out of Pommier's consciousness to find herself in his apartment with his wife. His wife realizes that Flax has some anomalous connection to her dead husband and takes her in. Eventually, the nomads arrive with many more members and begin to attack them inside the house. This marks a turning point because now both Flax, who begins to flash more rapidly between violent scenes in Pommier's memory and her own dangerous situation, and Pommier's wife can see the nomads (whereas before the wife could not). Somehow the two women arrive at the conclusion that they need to

leave the city limits to protect themselves from the nomads. Right as they are leaving the city limits, they see one last nomad who turns out to be Pommier himself.

While this film received quite negative feedback upon its release, and in certain ways may be considered underdeveloped, the kinds of thematics addressed are for one quite original, as well as uncharacteristic for a director whose oeuvre includes the likes of *Die Hard* and *Last Action Hero*. Primarily, this film addresses the resurgence of lost histories, which take on a spectral form, that are then disseminated in the form of contagion. The film also plays with an urban anxiety that if lost or repressed histories are allowed to appear in the light of day, they will bring society closer to an underworld that normal citizens make painstaking efforts to distance themselves from. In other words, lost or alternative histories threaten the normative models with contamination and corruption to the point where the very civilized order is itself at risk. The logic of haunting at work in this film is such that spectral agencies, if given an opening to make themselves known, will exploit this opportunity to the fullest, widening the crack as wide as possible for their reproduction and proliferation, infecting a world epistemologically stabilized by a persistent universalizing scientific rationality.

There are two instances in the film where possible interpretations of the identity of these street-punks are asserted. The first is when one of Flax's colleagues from the East coast calls to tell her that part of Pommier's last statement, "Des Innuats," actually refers to a figure in common nomad myths of Inuit. The Innuat were feared ghostly entities that could endanger Inuit tribesmen who walked long journeys alone in an endless desert of ice. They were "hostile spirits" who could assume human form, and were associated with "inhabiting places of past calamity." They also "brought disaster and madness to humans who fell in with them." The second

interpretation offered by the film also strengthens the validity of first, as it appears that Pommier meets another character, in a this case a nun in an abandoned building, whose existence is also quiet mysterious to say the least. She greets him by offering him a lantern which he may use to see his way around the empty building in which the power has been shut down because, as she claims, “the handyman, like the rest of the world has grown somewhat lax.” This nun also strangely knows Pommier’s name and explains to him that of course he will “be forgiven for thinking the building abandoned.” Pommier asks her if she is alone in the building, to which replies enigmatically, “Oh, I’ll be following the others eventually,” but currently she has been “left to look after things, as it were, though I’m not certain they saw the humor in it.” The curious expressions of the nun compels us to believe that she is from a different time, especially when she references “the boy” who brings groceries, and by her statement, “perhaps I’ve got the days muddled again.”

She begins to explain to Pommier that he should not get mixed up further with the nomads he is chasing because it will lead not only to his ruin, but to that of many others as well. “There are places with pasts Pommier, places with secrets where things collect. You just looked too closely; Most people are luckier...they never know that a certain percentage of what they see is not there. The problem is not what you know about it, but that they know about you....If you’ve never run from anything in your life, run from this. They’re leading you into another world. They brought you here upon me. It won’t end with you you know.” This passage confirms in part what Flax’s colleague spoke of on the telephone, that these hostile spirits are attracted to places with history, with secret history, where “things collect.” Upon hearing these statements, Pommier asks her, “What was this place? What happened here?” After this, she enunciates her

warning again to Pommier, and then, images of nuns running through the corridor are spliced in with the scene of the two talking. One nun bares her breasts, and another is shown dead, hanging from the ceiling. The combination of these images together convey an undefined, yet horrific, scene, in which we do not know exactly what happened, beyond the fact that two nuns seemed to have broken quite severely with their vows through the acts of suicide and bearing the naked body. These images suggest a world turned on its head, in which the normal mores are overturned in a kind of chaos. This scene is certainly one of the most confusing, and least explained scenes in a film that is characterized by consistently disorienting subject matter. It seems as though this particular house is such a place of “past calamity,” and that this woman belonged to the convent that was afflicted by the strange events that are cinematically alluded to. But it is unclear if she is actually human, or if she represents some other kind of spectral entity, familiar with the dangers of the nomads, but who ultimately serves different ends. By her advice to Pommier, it seems, considering that she seems to know all about him, that her primary aim was to protect him.

The reason why Pommier was drawn to the house in the first place is because the nomads were chasing him through the city, and this was one of locales they would frequent in their urban periphrasies. They also, of course, did this with his own house. At the beginning of the film, it is clear that the previous owners of his house had painted over graffiti on the garage door on more than one occasion, which is indicated when Pommier’s wife glides her hand across the outside wall and then sees that it has become white. The film then sharply cuts to an ominous-looking black van speeding away down their street. Then, the woman from the real-estate agency says, “hooligans or scum????” This scene suggests that the architectural order of the city, and

particularly the image of the single-family bungalow is one which continually attempts to remove the traces of past history from the buildings, always presenting a sanitized picture of a certain way-of-life. This scene, in a quick montage sequence, makes a direct correlation between an insulated suburban image of city and an anxiety concerning an ominous urban underworld.

After Pommier and his wife move into their new home, Pommier goes outside after he hears a sound, and sees that his garage door has been vandalized with the phrase “PIGS KILL.” He then goes into the garage, and unrolls what seems to be a piece of linoleum that is spattered with red splotches. Inside of this roll, are a few newspaper clippings with the different headlines of “Seize Burglar in Brutal Slaying--School children surprise thief” and “‘Musician’ arraigned--Parents find the mutilated bodies of children.” Also, included in this bundle is a spray-painted “WELCOME.” Apparently, Pommier’s house was also the site of traumatic past events that have now been generally forgotten, yet also sanitized from the landscape by the act the repainting the walls. It seems as though those who left this bundle of strange clues are interested in keeping the memory of this history alive somehow, as well as “reinhabiting” this locale with its own past. They also welcome the new residents to inhabit a place that is somehow still actively laden with the presence of the past, which also serves as a warning to the new residents that this presence will not be destroyed regardless of how many attempts there are to cover over it.

Overall, the cosmology of the film presents us with spectral entities that may exist, but are not there (“Most people are luckier; they never know that a certain percentage of what they see is not there.”). These entities are associated with traumatic histories that are suppressed by the current spatio-temporal order. They are associated with keeping a certain kind of historical memory alive, haunting relentlessly the places associated with that memory. However, these

“spirits” do not stop here. Not only do they plague the geography with its own repressed memories, they also seem to want to bring other humans into their world. This is demonstrated most clearly by the conversion of Pommier himself into a nomad at the end of film after his death at the beginning of the film. This entails greater demands on the part of the nomads; not only do they seek to keep the past alive, they also want to increase their influence over the human world. Towards the end of the film, more and more people associated in a chain of events with Pommier were either infected with Pommier’s memories, or attacked by the nomads, which also means that these other people could see the nomads. In this sense, Pommier’s anthropological curiosity endangers not only his life, but the lives of many others, as he provided a kind of opening for the nomads to exploit. (“Don’t pursue this...for the sakes of those you’ll lead them to.”)

The basic dynamic here can be described as a return of the repressed that returns toxically to infect the world of the living. This repressed history which once haunted the phenomenal world embodies the present world in such a way that it continues the work of haunting through the logic of contagion and reduplication. In this film, haunting entails a constant revisiting and insistence on particular weaknesses or gaps within a historical edifice; when haunting becomes materialized, crossing over into the realm of the living, it begins to resemble the contagious spread of disease, partially justifying retroactively any and all attempts to cordon off and expunge toxic history from the current reality. While this fantasy can be traced in a variety of works covering a few different genres, it remains to be seen what kind of human fear this fantasy attempts to process or even reconcile. This fantasy tends to emerge around fissures in the divide between nature and culture, erected by a modern paradigm, and also emerges in catastrophic

moments in which an entire form of life is threatened. However, this fantasy also seems to be connected with breakdowns in collective self-similarity.

The agents of this historical haunting in the film appear as a members of a street gang, contrary to how they looked when they existed in the human world. We learn at the end of the film that at least some nomads were previously actual human beings. (Pommier can be identified as a nomad at the end of the film because he is also dressed as a punk and riding a motorcycle. Adam Ant's character is a nomad in the film, but we also see his picture in one of the newspaper clippings left at Pommier's house). The figure of the street gangster in 1980's Southern California was often portrayed as a threat to the greater suburban civilization of the United States. In this case, specters who have not yet achieved a full ontological consistency require a form from the present reality in order to appear, even though they may represent "past calamity." In this sense, McTiernan's film is also a reactionary portrayal of suburban paranoia, which was often projected against the urban poor in a racist fashion in the segregated Los Angeles of the 1980's. However, what we see here is that the spectral contagion of repressed history is attached in a racist/classist fashion to the individuals marginalized from the hegemonic normative positions of the society in question.

A similar dynamic can be seen in Mike Davis's indictment of edge-city paranoia around the usually-solitary mountain lion predators of the coastal sage-scrub Southern California landscape.²⁷⁶ Their emergence from seclusion to prey on the children of the suburban elite is figured often as an unforgivable criminal act that warrants capital-punishment without trial. But here there is a direct blindness on the part of homeowners and suburban dwellers that the

²⁷⁶ Mike Davis. *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*. New York: Vintage Books, 1998.

beautiful landscapes that inflate their property value also have the undesirable cost of being not-fully-integrated, and therefore not purged of all “uncivilized” elements. Davis discusses how the beasts are demonized as a kind of racialized criminal underclass who transgress the strictures of neighborhood watch policy and homeowner’s association aesthetic and behavioral regulations, along with the gates that are supposed to keep them out.

Indeed, in the minds of most suburbanites, the unruliness in the center of the metropolis is figuratively recapitulated at its periphery. It is not surprising that predators are criminalized as trespassers and discursively assimilated to ‘serial killers’ or ‘gangbangers.’ Reciprocally, the urban underclass is incessantly bestialized as ‘predators,’ ‘wilding youth,’ and ‘wolf packs’ in an urban ‘wilderness.’ In ripe Hegelian fashion, then, the social construction of nature is typically mirrored by the naturalization of purely social contradictions. (208)

Davis characterizes the uncanny fridges of edge-city culture, outlining the implication that these new real-estate zones, whose *raison-d’etre* is to escape the poverty and crime of inner-cities characterized by massive uneven development, are the outposts of a civilization based on an ever-expansive economic development—which turns out to be, so clearly in this case, an escape from the problems it has caused.

Davis also turns to the obverse of this suburban dynamic to the inner-city. Here, he explains how the criminal and racially excluded elements of the inner-city are often figured in animal terms and imagery, characterizing them as having pack, horde, and infectious properties. The same can be said of *Nomads*,²⁷⁷ in that here, the historically excluded and marginalized are figured as threatening emissaries from the wilderness (from the ice deserts of Inuit territory, to be precise) who wreak havoc at the consumptive urban core (which we learn from one of Flax’s colleagues that “People don’t realize this city is built on desert.”) This dialectic, which Davis

²⁷⁷ *Nomads*. Dir. John McTiernan. Cinema VII, 1986. Film

explores, does the work of highlighting the uncanny presence of wilderness in its spectral figurations in both the suburban backyard and the transparent space of urban modernity. But what this dialectical maneuver exposes is that wilderness has on the one hand always been a civilizational construct, as its necessary outside that it both desires and repels, and on the other, that wilderness has an intimate ontological relationship with the repressed by-products of civilizational progress.

In his *Einbahnstrasse*,²⁷⁸ written during his adult life in Berlin, Walter Benjamin also addresses the loss of urban insulation in the midst of excessive intermingling of disparate entities within metropolitan space. What is interesting about his observation about “Great Cities” is that he frames a process of urban “contamination” as an “invasion of the countryside.” As he says, “Not by the landscape, but by what in untrammled nature is most bitter: plowed land, highways, night sky that the veil of violent redness no longer conceals. The insecurity of even the busy areas puts the city-dweller in the opaque and truly dreadful situation in which he must assimilate, along with isolated monstrosities from the open country, the abortions of urban architectonics.” (76) The passage refers to a resurgence of nature within metropolitan space as a form of ruination that signifies the end of the city’s enclosed self-protection. The form of economic “progress” which stands behind the cycles of development and decay expresses itself in the disfigured body of the city in places of neglect and abandonment, “the abortions of urban architectonics,” places which carry in them traces of a “foul” confrontation between the natural and cultural worlds. It seems possible that the foulness, or bitterness, which he speaks of, responsible for cities losing their “intrinsic character” is much more an index of the initial

²⁷⁸ Walter Benjamin. *Reflections*. New York, Schocken Books, 1986.

slice of separation (which takes the form of “plowed land” or “highways”), which proclaims the lie that cohabitation and co-constitutiveness of these two worlds is both non-existent and impossible.

Thus, it becomes crucial to approach the spatial and temporal being of uncanny places in the urban context as laboratories for the irrational component within a cultural unconscious which fears and refigures its own history. Here, the places of modern ruins become an important figure for this kind of analysis, precisely because of the kind of perspectives their positioning affords, as well as the way they are envisaged by their neighbors. Industrial and modern ruins, by virtue of their outsideness to the normal temporality and spatiality of capitalist production and consumption, avail them as depositories for various strata of cultural anxieties, which do the work of coding the places themselves, as they do not fit into the overarching order of transparent spatial authority. This way of seeing them also leads to their cordoning off, and placing outside of the zone of proper legality, as criminal spaces in which anti-social behavior occurs. The types of people who frequent or inhabit these places are often homeless, and criminal elements who are figured as threatening by neighborhoods as some kind of contagion which needs to be quarantined or snuffed out. As Anthony Vidler writes in his analysis of “dark space”:

‘Outside,’ even as the spaces of exile, asylum, confinement, and quarantine of the early modern period were continuously spilling over into the ‘normal’ space of the city, so the ‘pathological spaces’ of today menace the clearly marked out limits of the social order. In every case ‘light space’ is invaded by the figure of ‘dark space,’ on the level of the body in the form of epidemic and uncontrollable disease, and on the level of the city in the person of the homeless.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁹ Anthony Vidler. *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994. p. 168

Because these places are haunted by layers of anxious projection, they also have the ability to construct their occupants into spectral agents who work in the name of dark, non-descript purposes. The dynamic which produces both these ruined places and their inhabitants is thought in terms of disease and blight which afflicts the civilization from outside, as a dangerous non-human, enemy force. But in truth, these places and people are simply the by-products of the crisis-driven cycles of capitalist progress and fallout. Thus, it may be true these urban spaces are afflicted by something external, but this externality is none other than the abstract work of transnational capital accumulation which controls the spatial order by means of distance. Thus, the history of capitalist fallout has its spatial component. But in what kind of world does this history dwell and what kind of potential, threatening or positive, does it have?

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