

Surpassing Estrangement: The Reconciliation Between Species Being and Subjective Architectonics in Benjamin

By Michael Nail

The architectonics of life, what we might loosely call "culture," have been produced throughout history by the accidents that have issued forth originally from economic systems, or from the systems that have subjugated the economy. That these are accidents does not mean that these are fully undetermined by the relationship between the worker and his economic relationships. Rather, for example, it is certain that the forms of filmmaking in a certain time are determined at first by the systems of economic exchange, though not directly. For instance, the progression from the silent film to the talkie was positively determined, while the phasing out of the silent film by the talkie was negatively determined. It is these negative determinations, these phasing-outs, that define the scope of culture, since the new is not yet solidified into culture until it has phased out what it supersedes. In this particular example, it is an accident of technological progress that produces

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culture, and we might say that this technological progress is an accident of the economic sphere, which is, if not a system for *immediately* distributing power-*qua*-estranged labor capital, then a system for distributing power indirectly in the form of specific culture. The hierarchy of negatively established power relations necessarily both places the power to disseminate architectonic systems in the hands of those who possess massive amounts of capital and determines the form of this power.

I find that this rendering of the concept of capital is most salient in our postmodern era, which seems to be characterized (in Marxist language) not by the simple estrangement of workers from their labor, but by their *estrangement from their estranged labor* (“*double estrangement*”). That is to say, with the introduction of such social programs as welfare and unemployment benefits with almost universal ubiquity, the phrasings of Marx, that “the proportion of capital to revenue... seems everywhere to regulate the proportion between industry and idleness,” and that, “wherever capital predominates, industry prevails; wherever revenue, idleness”¹ no longer hold. Men are no longer identities with their jobs, and although their labor is still estranged from them, this estrangement is no longer the most salient feature in the experience of the self. The workers' relationship with their labor before its estrangement is already abstracted such that the direct correlation between labor and subsistence has been dissolved.

The economy is still the original well that powers the production of the architectonics of life, but it no longer fashions the architectonics of life directly. Instead, the political realm, which had once functioned within and at the mercy of the economy, has become an arbiter of the economy from outside of the system of labor relations. The political realm is also a hub through which mass culture is able to participate in the arbitration of the economy's raw architectonic-systematizing power, as conveyed in the form of government agencies and private industries. Those entities that hold vast amounts of capital are able to disseminate architectonic systems even from within the economy. With the abstraction of man's labor-power, there is no longer a man-*qua*-

labor power concept to supersede the architectonic systems issuing forth from places other than the location of employment. In short, a man's hermeneutic for experiencing the world through himself has shifted, of necessity, from being purely labor-produced to being produced by commercial products. The point of architectonic systematization has been shifted from the beginning of the production process to the end.

In the following text, we will explore the alterations in the conception of species being theory and estranged labor between Karl Marx and the early Frankfurt School (i.e. Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin) in the face of the latter's consideration of the force of the commodity's effect on the individual as having a hand in producing an architectonic system. Benjamin's distinction between individual and mass consciousness will play a central role in quelling the problems that Marx's species being theory would pose to such a "return of the commodity." Finally, we will see that the commodity can indeed return to the individual as a source of architectonic systemization, and that this return can even free itself from the necessity of being related to the individual's labor relations.

The Architectonics of Life in Marx

In his collection of aphorisms, *Minima Moralia*, Theodor Adorno writes, "Technology is making gestures precise and brutal, and with them men. It expels from movements all hesitation, deliberation, civility. It subjects them to the implacable, as it were ahistorical demands of objects."¹ The car, microwave, and refrigerator doors have self-locking mechanisms and must be slammed shut, and for me to go *anywhere* means to place at my disposal the strength of 150 horses. These are some among the pieces of our modern culture that together produce an architectonic system of life. In his *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin also describes the systemization of an architectonics of life as issuing from commercial productions. He sets aside an entire chapter for the treatment of "The Collector" and his behavior and functions. He writes that "perhaps the most deeply hidden

motive of the person who collects can be described this way: he takes up the struggle against his dispersion."² In other words, he feels himself scattered about the world because he invests his identity in commodities. He does not find his identity in these commodities because he produced them, but because they produce him. They attack him from all corners of life, in advertising, in entertainment, and elsewhere. Nearly every person who has a job must pass by numerous storefronts and billboards. The very existence of commercial products today gives rise to their proliferation outside of the commercial sphere.

These two thinkers, Benjamin and Adorno, both known as having taken many cues from Marx's species-being based theories, stand in stark opposition to Marx in reckoning the relationship between men and themselves. If we ask Marx what he has to say about the relationship between men and themselves, we will get the species-being argument. Man is a "universal" being; "the more universal man is compared with an animal, the more universal is the sphere of inorganic nature on which he lives."³ The "universal" man makes "inorganic nature," or that part of nature which he puts his labor into, into a part of his "inorganic body," as an extension of his real body. For the optimally universal man, this inorganic body includes all other men, so that each man is all others while being himself, and his labor benefits himself as an individual abstractly, while benefiting the species directly.

Marx makes class struggle the transcendent determining factor in producing the architectonics of life by the following movement: "In estranging from man (1) nature, and (2) himself, his own active functions, his life-activity, estranged labor estranges the *species* from man. It turns for him the *life of the species* into a means of individual life."⁴ The worker's relation to himself having been turned into one of mere self-preservation, his relationship with the rest of mankind becomes his participation in a standard wage-range. The capital which the worker produces stands against him in the form of private property. His wage, therefore, stands against him as a tool for the continuation of the system that produces private property by providing the creators

of commodities with their sustenance. Marx's analysis of political economy, of his own admission, "does not recognize the unoccupied worker, the workman, in so far as he happens to be outside this labor-relationship."⁵ For Marx, as far as the systemization of the architectonics of the life of the worker is concerned, there is nothing left for analysis outside of political economy, since political economy has the character of absorbing into itself all that might form such architectonics; the life of *the worker* gives meaning to everything in the life of *the man* before such a life can give meaning unto itself. Political economy *is* the architectonics of life. In more contemporary times, Marx's explanation seems partly appealing, yet too restrictive. It needs modification to carry substantial weight.

The Reconciliation between Political Economy, Species Being, and a Subjective Architectonic System in Benjamin

The conundrum here is that Benjamin does not regard political economy as directly related to the creation of an architectonics of life, though he subscribes to Marx's framework concerning the worker's relationship to a system of political economy. Benjamin acknowledges Marx's framework, quoting him in *The Arcades Project* in order to describe the particular form of self-alienation that he intended to work with:

"Self-alienation: 'The worker produces capital; capital produces him--hence, he produces himself, and... his human qualities exist only insofar as they exist for capital *alien* to him... The worker exists as a worker only when he exists *for himself* as capital; and he exists as capital only when some capital exists *for him* [that is, in place of him.]. The existence of capital is *his* existence,... since it determined the tenor of his life in a manner indifferent to him... Production... produce[s] man as... a *dehumanized* being.'"⁶

Even after this acknowledgement, Benjamin's exposition of the

worker as a dehumanized being functions almost completely through the worker's commercial and social environment.

We must recognize, then, that Benjamin functions based on an assumption that the worker's becoming a dehumanized being is not identical with the becoming of an architectonics of life for that worker. Instead, it seems that, for Benjamin, the rendering of the worker as dehumanized is also the creation of opportunities for the worker's capital to act not only *against* him, as an alien object, but also *for* him, as that which creates for him an architectonics of life. In this way, Benjamin counters the assumption Marx makes—that purchasing falls within the labor relationship while the potential use of that which may be purchased falls without. Marx had written, “Political economy does not recognize the unoccupied worker, the workman, in so far as he happens to be outside this labor-relationship.” This statement is true also for Benjamin, but Benjamin does not think that the unoccupied worker, unaddressed by his very self-identity, loses the ability to function as a placebo, placebo, here, meaning that which has the ability to take on the meaning of what surrounds it. For Benjamin, this placebo-function is still possible, but not on an individual level. In the collective of individuals bound up and compartmentalized in their labor relations, there exists a “mass consciousness” that is capable of systemizing an architectonics of life for its individuals that is not directly determined by estranged labor. The creation, then, of life outside of labor relations is dependent on the relationship between the individual and the mass consciousness. The individual is indeed still estranged from himself as a human, but even so, he experiences himself in a manner undetermined by his estranged labor.

Benjamin, in the following passage, makes it clear that the very commodities that are able to identify their consumers, through the double estrangement of labor, are collectively the mediator between individual and mass consciousness. The passage reads:

“The nineteenth century [is] a dreamtime in which the individual consciousness secures itself more and more in

reflecting, while the collective consciousness falls deeper and deeper into sleep. But just as the sleeper -- in this respect like the madman -- sets out on a macrocosmic journey through his own body, and the noises and feelings of his insides, such as blood pressure, intestinal churn, heartbeat, and muscle sensation (which for the waking and salubrious individual converge in a steady surge of health) generate, in the extravagantly heightened inner awareness of the sleeper, illusion or dream imagery which translates or accounts for them, so likewise for the dreaming collective, which, through the arcades, communes with its own insides. We must follow in its wake so as to expound the nineteenth century -- in fashion and advertising, and buildings and politics -- as the outcome of its dream visions."⁷

The individual becomes once again a species-being in his relationship with the mass consciousness, in its "sleep." The individual human relates to the rest of his or her species outside of their labor relations, but only in an oblique manner through the "dream" of the mass consciousness. This "dream" manifests itself in the landscape of commodities, and lives the humanity that the individuals have no access to, except through their participation in mass consciousness. The individual cannot help but be "awake" in the face of the dreaming collective. Since the only mediator between himself and said collective is the commodity, he must shape his desire into the form of the produced commodity, and *really* desire something that ends with his own thought. Meanwhile, that part of himself that transcends his individuality through the mediation of the commodity desires the cultural product that returns to him after his double estrangement.

Fashion's wild gestures are able to combine internal coherence with external incomprehensibility through its participation in the desires of the dreaming collective as teleologically already having been returned to individual consciousness as a commodity as doubly-estranged at the time of the first presentation of its individual creations to "wakeful" individuals. Benja-

min writes, "For the philosopher, the most interesting thing about fashion is its extraordinary anticipations."⁸ The designer, however, is no augur. It is not the designer, but rather the mass consciousness that determines what an acceptable winter coat might look like, and that can be said to *anticipate* the future. Benjamin writes, "Fashion is in much steadier, much more precise contact with the coming thing [than is art], thanks to the incomparable nose which the feminine collective has for what lies waiting in the future." The individual artist has no such access to the future, because he produces his work for individual commissioners. The designer, though, must match the vision of the mass consciousness, and the individuals think about the future through their aggregate commercial desire. In this way, mass consciousness passively determines the content of the mediated architectonic space (i.e. arcades or modern shopping malls) individuals live in *through* the perception of these same individuals, and therein return the commodity to these individuals. Fashion stands out not by mediating between mass and individual consciousness more seamlessly, but by presuming double-estrangement before designing its product. The designer perceives a singular estrangement, elaborates the secondary estrangement in his design, and creates a product that creates the desire that it fulfills through its internal logic of estrangement, therein *seeming* to "anticipate the future." In reality, the commodity has only anticipated its own internal logic, which the consumer takes to be an external logic-of-the-mass upon contact with the commodity.

Contrary to Marx's belief, the worker as a subject plays a role in the shaping of his experience beyond his being a laborer. The subject's role is to be the object of the world of commodities around him, and this world is the mass of commodities that the collective to which he belongs has subconsciously demanded. This is the manner in which the mass consciousness is able to communicate with its individuals: through a mediation that has the characteristics of, as Benjamin calls it, "the subconscious." The laborer may indeed at base desire his wage, but his human desires *do* return to him through this mass subconscious in order

to act upon him and create for him an architectonic systemization of experience that rejects the world of labor as a source for content.

That which was estranged from the worker returns to him, whether he purchases commodities or not, through advertising. Benjamin notes that this return of the commodity is a modern phenomenon, and calls the person to whom the commodity returns in this fashion, "flaneur." What does he mean by this? Benjamin writes, "Paris created the type of the flaneur. What is remarkable is that it wasn't Rome. And the reason? Does not dreaming itself take the high road in Rome? And isn't that city too full of temples, enclosed squares, national shrines, to be able to enter... with every cobblestone, every shop sign, every step... into the passerby's dream?"⁹ Paris, since the Haussmann reconstruction of the city, has been designed in such a way that either a passage is too wide to allow people to stop, but rather forces people to the sides to make way for carriages; or else the passages are residential areas or "arcades," which are enclosed passageways between ten and 40 feet wide lined with storefronts covered by a windowed ceiling cast into iron girders. Neither these arcades nor the boulevards allowed for idleness. The result of the Haussmann renovation, which was reactionary in nature after the Revolution, was the abolition of any use of space that did not either mean exposure to a commodity, participation in labor, residence, or transportation to one of the previous three. The point that Benjamin makes by referencing Rome's enclosed squares and national shrines is that such places would mediate "the landscape built of sheer life", that they would have been opportunities for the individual to realize himself in a way independent from production. If Rome had emerged as the example of 20th century life, it would have allowed for a reserve of material that architectonic systemization might have drawn upon that had to do neither with labor commodities nor with estrangement from labor. But it seems that Benjamin is right about characterizing the Parisian scheme as the decisive innovation.

What Is "Modern" in the Relationship between the Individual and Mass Consciousness

That individuals have this highly oblique access to a form of human life does not save society from the Marxist criticism that there is "a class of laborers who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labor produces capital."¹⁰ The difference now is that the fight to find work is a fight to obtain money for discretionary spending. No such thing as discretionary funds existed for Marx's proletariat, but for the modern equivalent of the proletariat, sustenance is a guarantee. Our method for understanding the experience of the self now revolves around the return of the commodity to the worker, and the commodity has always been the object of discretionary spending. For Marx's proletariat, the commodity existed perfectly outside of the individual worker's reach, but could enter the mass consciousness as an ideal, a prognostication, or what have you. The modern working class is fully capable of obtaining commodities, and therefore each individual is capable of interacting with the productions of the mass consciousness he participates in.

We might consider the relative ubiquity of discretionary spending (the five-cent silent films of the Great Depression is a worthy example) as a solidification of the oblique relationship between individual and mass consciousness. Discretionary spending puts in the hands of the people the car whose door must be slammed shut, and allows commodities to make "gestures precise and brutal, and with them men. It expels from movements all hesitation, deliberation, civility. It subjects them to the implacable, as it were ahistorical demands of objects." The modern situation is that which makes the oblique relationship between individual and mass consciousness solid, and subjects the individual to the state of mind of the mass directly, and as we shall see, violently.

It is not only the new role of discretionary spending that brings us into the modern era, but also that category of the accidents of technology that have to do with the reproduction of me-

dia. The relationship between individual and mass consciousness is not a product of reproduction technology, but is rather made into a two-way relationship where it had once been nearly one-sided. Concerning this change, Benjamin wrote, "When Marx undertook his analysis of the capitalist mode of production, this mode was in its infancy.... It has taken more than half a century for the change in the conditions of production to be manifested in all areas of culture."¹¹ The change congruent to industrial production seen in culture is a more direct conditioning of, and reacting to, the desires of the masses. Those who control vast capital, those who have the capacity to systematize the architectonics of life, typify their commodities in mass-production, and in doing so, force the typification of the desires of mass consciousness.

Remember again that the commodity returns to the worker as a part of his self-experience through mass consciousness: in this circumstance, the destruction of the unique thing is welcome. There is a "passionate concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction."¹² The worker is still a species being as far as he receives his humanity through mass consciousness. This means that the individual can only benefit from a commodity *abstractly* as long as the species, mass consciousness here, benefits from it *directly*, or else not at all. A work of art then, as an authentic, one-of-a-kind piece, will rarely reach the working individual, unless it is stripped of its authenticity, and made available to the whole consciousness. It is because Coca-Cola is readily accessible that we can incorporate it into our understanding of our species, and thereby ourselves, even if we, as particular individuals, have by chance never enjoyed Coca-Cola.

We have seen that every working individual at once participates in two different relationships. The first relationship is between individual and mass consciousness, and the second is between individual and labor. The experiences of these two relationships are the two sides of what Benjamin calls the "dialectic of flanerie." He writes that, "on the one side, the man ...feels himself viewed by all and sundry as a true suspect and, on the other side, the man ...is utterly undiscoverable, the hidden

man.”¹³ The first side is the experience of the relationship between one’s self and mass consciousness. The experience of this relationship becomes more intense as the reactions of the arbiters of architectonic systemization, the holders of private property, to the desires of mass consciousness become more directly determined by mass consciousness. This increase in directness is a necessary by-product of advances in reproduction technology.

Reproduction technology necessarily proliferates its own functionality, so that an insignificant piece of information out of thousands will acquire the preference of mass consciousness, and that piece of information, as a result of its preference, will proliferate throughout reproducible media. Here is an extreme example consequence of Benjamin’s technological reproduction thesis: it is for this reason that "memes" exist on the Internet.* On the Internet, which we might recognize as the absolute height of reproduction technology, everything that has ever been said is catalogued. Any phrase ever spoken there can be proliferated throughout the internet at the will of a single person. If a phrase is somehow preferred by the mass consciousness, then it becomes a “meme,” because all of the Internet’s users will proliferate it as an acceptable component of language. In this extreme example, we see the import of Benjamin’s statement, that “when Marx undertook his analysis of the capitalist mode of production, this mode was in its infancy.... It has taken more than half a century for the change in the conditions of production to be manifested in all areas of culture,” has been fully played-out. Double estrangement allows the commodity, disconnected from the estranged labor that created it, to be produced by anything so long as the requirement of mass-production is met. Double estrangement also causes the typification of commercial desires. With the Internet, the identity between producer of content and consumer of content accelerates the becoming of the identity between the typification of content and the desire of the individual. More simply put, either mass consciousness comes closer to “awakening,” or individual consciousness comes closer to “sleep.” To determine which would be the topic of another, lengthier paper on the topic of modern ubiquitous digital media,

but suffice it to say here that Benjamin correctly determined the correct direction of interpretation for Marx's preliminary studies of capitalist political economy.

Conclusion

Marx's species being theory restricted him to a conception of estranged labor in which the commodity could not return to its conceptual producer in order to determine his architectonic experience of himself. Benjamin, convinced that the commodity must in some way determine the architectonic systemization of the individual, needed to reconcile this determination with Marx's species being theory. His conception of separate mass and individual consciousnesses, mediated with each other through the commodity, allowed him to reconcile the return of the commodity to the individual as a source for architectonic systemization with the concept of the species being. The individual, even if he exists outside of the realm of immediate labor relations, still creates the commodity that he receives as a consumer and as an individual in mediation with the mass consciousness.

Notes

- ¹ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso Books, 2005), 40.
- ² Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland & Kevin McLaughlin, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2002), 211.
- ³ Karl Marx & Frederic Engles, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (New York: Prometheus Books, 1988), 75.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.
- ⁶ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland & Kevin McLaughlin, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2002), 652. Benjamin cites this quotation as being from '*Der historische Materialismus: Die Frühschriften*', ed. Landshut and Mayer (Leipzig), vol. 1, pp. 361-362 ("National-ökonomie und Philosophie").
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 389.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 417.
- ¹⁰ Karl Marx & Frederick Engles, *The Communist Manifesto*, ed. Phil Gasper (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), 49.
- ¹¹ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility," *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Vol. 4*, ed. Howard Eiland & Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2006), 251, 2.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 255.
- ¹³ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland & Kevin McLaughlin, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2002), 420.

* *Meme* is a word widely accepted on the Internet that refers to a word, phrase, or image that functions to express an idea. Memes differ from normal words, phrases, or images used for expression because they originate from specific events rather than evolving from language. For example, the phrase "NINTENDO SIXTY-FOUR!" became a meme after an Internet user posted a video on youtube.com of his son opening a Christmas present containing a Nintendo 64 video game system. The child in the video displayed an unreasonable, perhaps frightening amount of joy at receiving the gift. The aforementioned phrase now no longer has any connection with an electronic device in many circles of the Internet, but instead expresses unreasonable joy. For example: "Why did he go all NINTENDO SIXTY-FOUR! over that?"

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