The Dialectics of Seeing

Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project

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Mythic Nature: Wish Image

1

The arcades as dream- and wish-image of the collective.[1]

Benjamin was struck by an incontestable, empirical fact: Consistently, when modern innovations appeared in modern history, they took the form of historical restitutions. New forms "cited" the old ones out of context. Thus: "There is an attempt to master the new experiences of the city in the frame of the old ones of traditional nature."[2] And: "[The nineteenth century develops] a thirst for the past."[3]

It was "insane that the French fashions of the Revolution and Napoleon I's Empire mimicked the [ancient] Greek proportions with modern cut and sewn clothing."[4]

The *Passagen-Werk* material is full of evidence of this fusion of old and new. Fashion continuously drew on the past: "[W]ith the Munich Exposition of 1875, the German Renaissance became fashionable."[5] Mechanical looms in Europe mimicked handwoven shawls from the Orient, while the first women's "sportswear" (designed in the 1890s for bicycle riding) "strove [with its tight-fitting waists and rococo skirts] for the conventional ideal-image of elegance."[6] When Baudelaire searched for the words to describe the specifically modern struggles of the urban poet, he revived the "archaic image of the fencer."[7] When social utopians conceived of new, communal societies, it was as a restitution of small-scale agricultural production. Fourier's phalansterie, a highly complex,

machinelike social organization conceivable only within a modern context,[8] was to produce "the land of Cockaigne, the ur-old wish symbol of leisure and plenty [. . .]."[9]

Nowhere was the restorative impulse more evident than in the forms taken by the new technologies themselves, which imitated precisely the old forms they were destined to overcome. Early photography mimicked painting.[10] The first railroad cars were designed like stage coaches, and the first electric light bulbs were shaped like gas flames.[11] Newly processed iron was used for ornament rather than structural supports, shaped into leaves, or made to resemble wood.[12] Industrially produced utensils were decorated to resemble flowers, fauna, seashells, and Greek and Renaissance antiques.[13] "Wild Salome" appeared in a *Jugendstil* poster for cigarettes.[14] The newly invented bicycle was named by a poet "the Horse of the Apocalypse."[15] And the earliest form of air travel was celebrated by a staging of Uranus' rise from the earth:

The balloon driver Poitevin, underwritten by great publicity, undertook in his gondola [during the Second Republic] an ascension of Uranus with maidens dressed up as mythological figures.[16]

In the field of architecture, the wrought iron and steel that was first developed for railroads[17] would ultimately be combined with glass for the construction of modern skyscrapers.[18] But the Passages, the first constructions of iron and glass, instead resembled Christian churches,[19] while the first department stores with their immense glassed-in roofs "seemed to have been modeled after Oriental bazaars."[20] Benjamin speaks of iron and glass "come too early"[21]: "In the middle of the last century no one yet had an inkling of how to build with iron and glass."[22] An early entry in the *Passagen-Werk* notes: "Transportation in the stage of myth. Industry in the stage of myth. (Railroad stations and early factories)."[23] The 1935 exposé elaborates: "[Early nineteenth-century] architects mimic the pillars of Pompeiian columns; factories mimic private villas, as later the first railroad stations are modeled on chalets."[24] "'One simply transferred the way of building with wood onto iron'."[25]

Under the archaic masks of classical myth (figure 5.1) and traditional nature (figure 5.2), the inherent potential of the "new nature"—machines, iron shaped by new processes, technologies and industrial materials of every sort—remained unrecognized, unconscious. At the same time, these masks express the desire to

5.1 Poseidon adorns a fountain worked by an invisible steam engine, Crystal Palace Exposition, London, 1851.

5.2 Fountain of iron in the shape of dolphins, shells, and aquatic plants, Crystal Palace Exposition, London, 1851.

"return" to a mythic time when human beings were reconciled with the natural world.

Benjamin writes: "Fashion, like architecture, [. . .] stands in the darkness of the lived moment [*im Dunkel des gelebten Augenblicks*]."[26] He has taken this phrase from Ernst Bloch. It is central to Bloch's social utopian philosophy, describing the mystical "*nunc stans*," the momentary, fleeting experience of fulfillment dimly anticipatory of a reality that is "not-yet." According to Benjamin, if the "not-yet" of the new nature is expressed in archaic symbols rather than in new forms commensurate with it, then this condition of modern consciousness has its parallel in the inadequacies of development in the economic base. He is most explicit in a passage from the *Passagen-Werk* exposé. It begins with a quotation from Jules Michelet: "Every epoch dreams the one that follows it." Benjamin comments:

> To the form of the new means of production which in the beginning is still dominated by the old one (Marx), there correspond in the collective consciousness images in which the new is intermingled with the old. These images are wish images, and in them the collective attempts to transcend as well as to illumine the incompletedness of the social order of production. There also emerges in these wish images a positive striving to set themselves off from the outdated—that means, however, the most recent past. These tendencies turn the image fantasy, that maintains its impulse from the new, back to the ur-past. In the dream in which every epoch sees in images the epoch that follows, the latter appears wedded to elements of ur-history, that is, of a classless society. Its experiences, which have their storage place in the unconscious of the collective, produce, in their interpenetration with the new, the utopia that has left its trace behind in a thousand configurations of life from permanent buildings to ephemeral fashions.[27]

The real possibility of a classless society in the "epoch to follow" the present one, revitalizes past images as expressions of the ancient wish for social utopia in dream form. But a dream image is not yet a dialectical image, and desire is not yet knowledge. Wishes and dreams are psychological categories which for Benjamin have no immediate status as philosophical truth. Parting company with the romanticism of Ernst Bloch (who in turn criticized Benjamin's "surrealist philosophizing" for its lack of subjectivity[28]), Benjamin was reluctant to rest revolutionary hope directly on imagination's capacity to anticipate the not-yet-existing. Even as wish image, utopian imagination needed to be interpreted through the material

objects in which it found expression, for (as Bloch knew) it was upon the transforming mediation of matter that the hope of utopia ultimately depended: technology's capacity to create the not-yet-known.

2

The text on collective wish images cited above makes theoretical assertions rather than arguments, and they are by no means self-evident. It may be helpful to consider the passage more closely, this time in an earlier version of the exposé that is significantly different in wording and somewhat less elliptical:

> To the form of the new means of production that in the beginning is still dominated by the old one (Marx), there correspond in the societal superstructure wish images in which the new is intermingled with the old in fantastic ways.[29]

Now, Marx argued that when the new means of production comes into being, its socialist potential is fettered by still-existing capitalist relations—hence the inadequacy of development of the economic base. But as an entry in *Konvolut* F, "Iron Construction," makes clear, Benjamin believed these fetters must be understood in terms of the collective imagination, as inadequacies of form as well as of social relations—and that he understood Marx to have meant this as well. Benjamin cites *Capital*:

> "Just how much in the beginning the old form of the means of production dominated the new forms is demonstrated . . . perhaps more strikingly than anywhere by an experimental locomotive that was tested before the discovery of today's locomotives, which had in fact two feet that it raised up alternatingly, like a horse. Only after further development of mechanics and the accumulation of practical experience does the form become totally determined by the mechanistic principle and thereby completely emancipated from the traditional physical form of the work-instrument that bursts forth into a machine."[30]

Benjamin comments on Marx's observation: "Just what forms, now lying concealed within machines, will be determining for our epoch we are only beginning to surmise."[31] Here is the "new nature"[32] still in its mythic stage. Technology, not yet "emancipated," is held back by conventional imagination that sees the new only as a continuation of the old which has just now become obso-

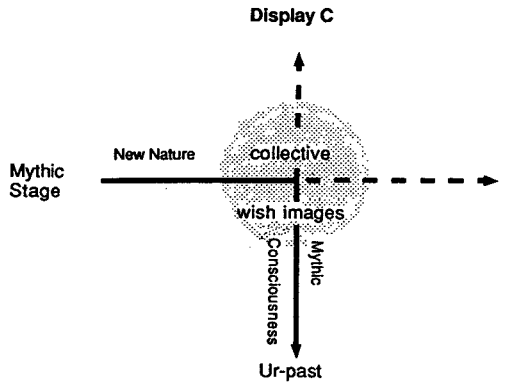
lete. Benjamin notes: "The conservative tendency in Parisian life: As late as 1867 an entrepreneur conceived of a plan to have five hundred sedan chairs circulating in Paris."[33]

Now Benjamin tells us that this formal inadequacy of the new nature is not synonymous with (but only "corresponds" to) "wish images" which, far from restraining the new within the given forms, reach back to a more distant past in order to *break from* conventional forms. The early version of the exposé continues:

> This intermingling owes its fantastic character above all to the fact that in the course of social development, the old never sets itself off sharply from the new; rather, the latter, striving to set itself apart from the recently outmoded, renews archaic, ur-temporal elements. The utopian images that accompany the emergence of the new always concurrently reach back to the ur-past. In the dream in which every epoch sees in images before its eyes the one that follows it, the images appear wedded to elements of ur-history.[34]

It is necessary to make a distinction: In nature, the new is mythic, because its potential is not yet realized; in consciousness, the old is mythic, because its desires never were fulfilled. Paradoxically, collective imagination mobilizes its powers for a revolutionary break from the recent past by evoking a cultural memory reservoir of myths and utopian symbols from a more distant ur-past. The "collective wish images" are nothing else but this. Sparked by the new, from which they "maintain their impulse,"[35] they envision its revolutionary potential by conjuring up archaic images of the collective "wish" for social utopia. Utopian imagination thus cuts across the continuum of technology's historical development as the possibility of revolutionary rupture (display C). This means that each of the "corresponding" elements—mythic nature and mythic consciousness—works to liberate the other *from* myth. "Wish images" emerge at the point where they intersect.

Benjamin is not maintaining that the contents of past myths provide a blueprint for the future. To believe that they could is purely utopian. Nowhere in his writings do the ur-images have a status other than that of dream symbol. They provide the motivation for future emancipation, which will not be literally a restoration of the past, but will be based on new forms that "we are only beginning to surmise." "Every epoch dreams the one that follows it"—as the *dream* form of the future, not its reality. The representations of the



collective unconscious are not revolutionary on their own, but only when dialectically mediated by the material, "new" nature, the as-yet unimagined forms of which alone have the potential to actualize the collective dream. The images are thus less pre-visions of postrevolutionary society than the necessary pro-visions for radical social practice. Hence Benjamin's theory of revolution as "innervation": Wish images "innervate" the "technical organ of the collective," supplying it with nerve stimulation that prompts revolutionary action—"like the child who learns [the practical task of] grasping by trying [impossibly] to catch the moon in its hands."[36]

By attaching themselves as surface ornamentation to the industrial and technological forms which have just come into existence, collective wish images imbue the merely new with radical political meaning, inscribing visibly on the products of the new means of production an ur-image of the desired social *ends* of their development. In short, even as they mask the new, these archaic images provide a symbolic representation of what the human, social meaning of technological change is all about. Thus it is of the utmost political significance that Victor Hugo saw in mass reproduction the historically real, objective form of Christ's miraculous division of bread to feed the multitudes: "The multiplication of readers is the multiplication of bread. The day when Christ discovered this symbol, he foresaw the printing works."[37] Similarly, it is crucial that Fourier's early nineteenth-century utopia, in which fish swim in rivers of lemonade and sharks help humans hunt for fish,[38] "filled the ur-old wish symbol of leisure and plenty [. . .] with new

life,"[39] and that utopian socialists generally resurrected images of an originary Golden Age:

"Yes, when the entire world, from Paris to China, O divine Saint-Simon, will come to embrace your doctrine, then must the Golden Age return in all its brilliance, the rivers will flow with tea and chocolate; sheep fully roasted will gambol on the plain, and pike cooked in butter will navigate the Seine; steamed spinach will spring from the ground with a border of croutons. The trees will bear stewed apples; and grain will grow in bales ready to harvest; it will snow wine, it will rain chickens, and ducks will drop from the sky with a garnish of turnips."[40]

Such visions are proof of the "too early" stage[41] of both technology and imagination. Their fantastic forms are "the most authentic witness" of "just how caught in a dream technological production was in its beginnings."[42] At the same time, however, they tell us that utopian desires have been attached to the new nature from the start. Insofar as their image traces have been lost in history, it is politically necessary to redeem them.[43] When Benjamin states that these images "pertain" to a "classless society," it is because the fairy-tale quality of the wish for happiness that they express presupposes an end to material scarcity and exploitative labor that form the structural core of societies based on class domination. The early version of the exposé passage concludes:

It is not because of being consciously garbled by the ideology of the ruling class that the reflections of the substructure within the superstructure are inadequate, but because the new, in order to shape itself visually, always connects its elements with those pertaining to a classless society. The collective unconscious has more of a share in it than the consciousness of the collective. Out of it come the images of utopia that have left their traces behind them in a thousand configurations of life from buildings to fashions.[44]

In the beginning of an era, there is an intuitive, "too-early" apprehension of the future. The residues of past cultural creations bear witness to it. But if the anticipatory wish symbols that leave their traces on these creations have remained "unconscious," this is another way of saying the collective is not even aware that it is dreaming—with the inevitable result that symbol turns into fetish, and technology, the means for realizing human dreams, is mistaken for their actualization. Commodity fetishes and dream fetishes become indistinguishable. When processed food appears on the shelf

5.3 "Human Happiness—food for the asking—in the Fourierist utopia"—Grandville, 1844.

as if it had dropped from a Saint-Simonian sky, commodities begin their "'theological capers,'"[45] the wish images become a phantasmagoria, and dream turns into delusion. When mass media are seen as themselves the democratization of culture, distributed as miraculously as Christ's multiplying food, they too become fetishes.

The tremendous power of the new technology has remained in the hands of the ruling class that wields it as a force of domination, while privately appropriating the wealth it produces. In this context, dream symbols are the fetishized desires that advertise commodities. And the collective goes on sleeping. But should it awaken, the utopian symbols can be redeemed as a manifestation of truth. Essential to this truth is its transitoriness. The wish symbols, signposts in a period of transition, can inspire the refunctioning of the new nature so that it satisfies material needs and desires that are the source of the dream in the first place. Wish images do not liberate humanity directly. But they are vital to the process.

3

"It is easy to understand that every great . . . 'interest,' when it first steps upon the world stage, extends in 'idea' or 'imagination' far beyond its real limits, and mistakes itself for the interest of humanity in general. This illusion forms that which Fourier calls the tone of every historical epoch."[46]

The technological capacity to produce must be mediated by the utopian capacity to dream—and vice versa. Was Benjamin presuming an autonomy of the imagination incompatible with historical materialism? Adorno thought so. He would not have considered the transiency of collective wish symbols sufficient cause for their redemption. Ultimately he saw no distinction between these dream images and conventional consciousness in that both were produced within the distorting context of class society. It was precisely the exposé passage on wish images considered above that so troubled him.[47] It seemed to eternalize in a most ahistorical way the contents of the collective psyche. Adorno appears to have understood Benjamin as affirming literally Michelet's idea that every age dreams its successor, as if dream images were dialectical images pure and simple, and he protested:

[. . . I]f the dialectical image is nothing but the mode in which the fetish character is conceived within collective consciousness, then indeed the Saint-Simonian conception of the commodity world might be brought to light, but not its reverse side, namely the dialectical image of the nineteenth century as Hell.[48]

The image of Hell, central to the "glorious first draft" of the Arcades project, appeared to Adorno to have been repressed in the exposé. The remaining idea of "wish images" was, he claimed, "undialectical," implying an "immanent," almost "developmental" relationship to a utopian future.[49] Against this Adorno insisted: "The fetish character of the commodity is not a fact of consciousness, but dialectic in the eminent sense that it produces consciousness."[50] And he urged: "The concept of the commodity as a fetish must be documented, as is surely your intent, by the man who discovered it"[51]—that is, by Marx himself.

Benjamin's response (via Gretel Karplus) was to agree with "almost all" of Adorno's reflections, but to claim that his conception in the exposé was not different. He had not given up the theme of Hell that figured so essentially in the early notes; rather, these notes and the exposé represented "the thesis and antithesis of the work."[52] That Adorno remained unconvinced, given the exposé's elusive wording, is not surprising. Yet the *Passagen-Werk* material substantiates Benjamin's claims. Throughout it, images of the nineteenth century as Hell figure prominently (as we have seen[53]). Benjamin *had* worked through the relevant passages of *Capital* on commodity fetishism.[54] Where the exposé spoke of the new as "intermingled with the old," Adorno said that he missed the inverse argument, that "the newest, as mere appearance and phantasmagoria, is itself the oldest."[55] But Benjamin's still-central conception of "natural history" made precisely this point.[56] Their disagreement was in fact limited to their evaluation of the collective's utopian desire (and hence the degree to which mass culture could be redeemed). Benjamin affirmed this desire as a transitory moment in a process of cultural transition. Adorno dismissed it as irredeemably ideological. In denying the autonomy of collective desire, he clearly believed his position to be the more rigorous from a dialectical materialist standpoint. Yet the argument lies close at hand that on this issue Benjamin was in fact in accord with Marx's own perceptions. In several texts, most explicitly in the *18th Brumaire of*

Louis Bonaparte, it was Marx who, well before Benjamin, observed the crucial role played by images that conjured up the symbols and myths of antiquity at times of radical historical rupture. Marx wrote:

> And just when [human beings] seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and objects, in creating something that has never existed before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up to their service the spirits of the past and borrow from them names, battle slogans and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language. Thus Luther wore the mask of the Apostle Paul, the revolution of 1789 to 1814 draped itself alternately as the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire [. . .].[57]

Marx goes on to criticize the bourgeois "revolutionaries" of 1848, whose citings of the past were no more than parodic *re*-citings in a farcical attempt to repeat the Revolution of 1789. He attributes the nineteenth-century predilection for ancient Rome to the bourgeoisie's need for "self deception," in order to "hide from themselves" the class limitations of the "content of their struggles."[58] At the same time, Marx recognizes that such historical masks are capable not only of concealing, but also of glorifying the very newness of the present historical drama, and that this can serve a progressive purpose *so long as the masking is temporary*:

> Thus at another stage of development, a century earlier, Cromwell and the English people borrowed the language, passions and illusions of the Old Testament for their bourgeois revolution. When the real goal was reached, when the bourgeois transformation of English society was accomplished, Locke displaced Habakkuk.
>
> The awakening of the dead in the case of this revolution served to glorify new struggles rather than parody old ones, to amplify the present task in the imagination, not to take flight from achieving it in reality, to rediscover the spirit of revolution, not to make its ghost walk about again.[59]

Marx warns that "the social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot create its poetry out of the past, but only from the future."[60] Yet he does not assume that the new "poetry" will be produced *ex nihilo* by the working class as soon as bourgeois ideological hegemony is overthrown. He compares the process to learning a new language:

> It is like the beginner [who . . .] always translates back into the mother tongue, but appropriates the spirit of the new language and becomes capable of producing freely within it only by moving about in it without recalling the old [. . .].[61]

Surely Benjamin means nothing else when, in considering the inadequacies of collective consciousness vis-à-vis the new technology, he asks:

> When and how will the worlds of form that have arisen in mechanics, in film, machine construction and the new physics, and that have overpowered us without our being aware of it, make what is natural in them clear to us? When will the condition of society be reached in which these forms or those that have arisen from them open themselves up to us as natural forms?[62]

So close is Benjamin to Marx's own formulation that the fact these passages are *missing* from the *Passagen-Werk* material must come as a surprise. Benjamin includes other passages from *18th Brumaire*,[63] while leaving this discussion (which occurs at the very beginning of Marx's text) unacknowledged. That the omission was accidental is unlikely. Rather, it suggests Benjamin realized that although his arguments paralleled those of Marx, they did not coincide. Marx was concerned with the moment of political revolution; Benjamin was concerned with the transition to socialism that comes after it.

In *18th Brumaire*, Marx wrote that socialist society "cannot begin itself until it has shed all superstition in regard to the past," and has "let the dead bury the dead."[64] But he left unexplained just how this shedding of the past was to be achieved. The result is a gap in Marx's theory which, whether or not he intended it to be, has been bridged by an implicit faith in historical progress, economically determined, as if once socialist production relations were established, industrial-technological production would itself generate the socialist imagination capable of producing a brand new culture. Benjamin's trip to Moscow had convinced him that seizing political power and nationalizing the economy, while the preconditions for socialist transformation, were not its guarantee, and that so long as the Soviet government repressed cultural innovation, the political revolution itself was in danger of being lost.[65] If his 1935 exposé put forth the notion that socialist culture would need to be constructed out of the embryonic, still-inadequate forms that preexisted in captialism, it was in the Artwork essay composed the same year that Benjamin articulated a full-blown theory of the

superstructure[66]: Whereas Marx had discovered in the capitalist economic base not only the creation of conditions which would lead to increasing exploitation of the proletariat but also those "that would make it possible to abolish capitalism itself," Benjamin argued that within the superstructure there was a separate (and relatively autonomous) dialectical process, "no less noticeable [. . .] than in the economy," but proceeding "far more slowly."[67] It is *this* dialectic that makes possible the transition to a socialist society.[68] It plays itself out between the collective imagination and the productive potential of the new nature that human beings have brought into being, but do not yet consciously comprehend. Moreover, this dialectic has developed *not* by "burying" the dead past, but by revitalizing it. For if future history is not determined and thus its forms are still unknown, if consciousness cannot transcend the horizons of its sociohistorical context, then where else *but* to the dead past can imagination turn in order to conceptualize a world that is "not-yet"? Moreover, such a move itself satisfies a utopian wish: the desire (manifested in the religious myth of awakening the dead) "to make [past] suffering into something incomplete,"[69] to make good an unfulfilled past that has been irretrievably lost.

The socialist transformation of the superstructure, which begins within capitalism under the impact of industrial technology, includes redeeming the past, in a process that is tenuous, undetermined, and largely unconscious. As a result of the distortions of capitalist social relations, the progressive and retrogressive moments of this process are not easily discerned. One of the tasks that Benjamin believed to be his own in the *Passagen-Werk* was to make both tendencies of the process visible retrospectively. He traces their origins to the forcefield between art and technology, which in the nineteenth century became falsely perceived as oppositional camps, with the result that even attempts to reconcile them produced reactionary cultural forms.

4

The relationship between art and technology is a central theme in the *Passagen-Werk*. The 1935 exposé presents this relationship in a programmatic way,[70] outlining specifically the impact in

the nineteenth century of photography on art, engineering on architecture, and mass journalism on literary production.[71] The result is an original contribution to Marxist theory,[72] suggesting not merely the ground for a materialist aesthetics and sociology of art (although both are implied). It identifies a structural transformation in the relationship of consciousness to reality—specifically, fantasy to productive forces—that has general theoretical significance, and that is capable of informing every sort of critical cultural practice. It could be said that for Benjamin progressive cultural practice entails bringing both technology and imagination out of their mythic dream states, through making conscious the collective's desire for social utopia, and the potential of the new nature to achieve it by translating that desire into the "new language" of its material forms. Benjamin writes that in the nineteenth century, the development of the technical forces of production "emancipated the creative forms (*Gestaltungsformen*) from art, just as in the sixteenth century the sciences liberated themselves from philosophy."[73] This is quite an extraordinary claim. It implies that, just as reason ("the sciences"), once having become secularized ("liberated from philosophy"), became free to be applied instrumentally to processes of social production, so imagination, inspired by "the creative forms" of technology and diverted from purely aesthetic goals (that is, "emancipated from art"), can be applied to the task of constructing a new basis for collective social life.

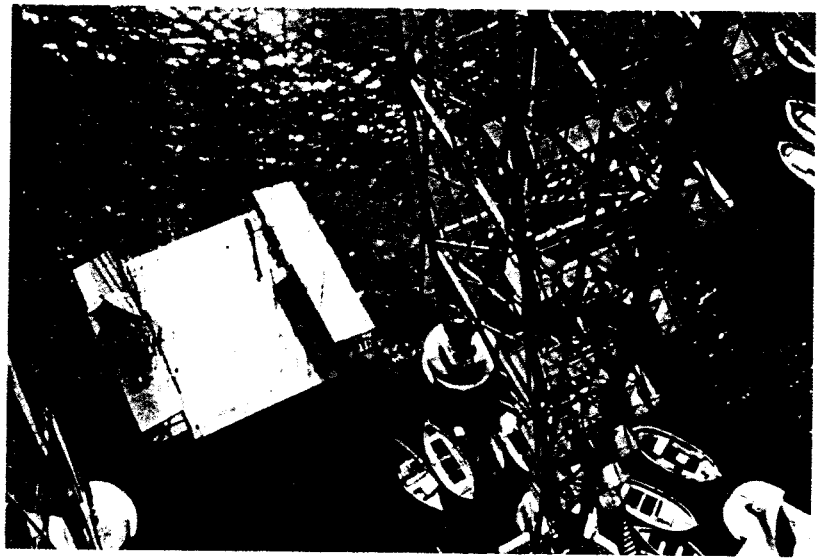
Previously, bourgeois art had appropriated the imaginative discovery of new forms as its own terrain, defined by the very fact of its separation from social reality. Following Adorno, one can argue that this separation was beneficial, sustaining a power of imagination that, because it was able to resist the given state of things, was the source of the utopian impulse intrinsic to bourgeois art. On one level, Benjamin surely would not disagree. Yet he would insist that the "autonomy of art" becomes a hollow phrase in light of the tremendous creativity of industrial production which itself constantly revolutionizes reality's material forms. In an argument absolutely dependent on Marxist theoretical claims (yet without precedent in Marx's own theory of the cultural superstructure[74]), Benjamin was suggesting that the objective (and progressive) tendency of industrialism is to fuse art and technology, fantasy and

function, meaningful symbol and useful tool, and that this fusion is, indeed, the very essence of socialist culture.

It is important to emphasize that Benjamin understood the synthesis of technology and art as a structural tendency, not synonymous with history's actual course. In fact the nineteenth century witnessed an institutionalization of the split between technology and art to a degree previously unknown in history. This split was strikingly manifested in the establishment (in 1794) of *l'Ecole polytechnique* as separate from, and moreover in rivalry with, *l'Ecole des beaux arts*. The former trained builders and "engineers"[75] for the construction of industrial edifices, naval ships and military fortifications.[76] The latter trained artists and "decorators,"[77] whose work was valued precisely because it refused to subject aesthetic imagination to functional purposes.[78] In this split, architecture fell to *l'Ecole des beaux arts*, a fact that "'worked to its detriment.'"[79] Previously, architecture had included the science of engineering.[80] Of all the arts, it had been "[. . .] the earliest to grow away from the concept of art, or better said, [. . .] it least tolerated the view that it was "art," a view which the nineteenth century forced upon the products of intellectual activity to a degree previously unimagined, yet with no more justification than before."[81]

The architectural style of the Paris arcades was emblematic of the warring tendencies of engineering and "art." Demanding the skills of both, it was recognized by neither *Ecole* as an object worthy of instruction.[82] On the one hand, the continuous glass roofs that became their hallmark in the 1820s were technologically advanced skylighting constructions; on the other, the interior "walls" of their shop galleries were the most derivative ornamental facades, replete with neoclassical columns, arches, and pediments that were the epitome of architectural "good taste." As dialectical images, the arcades thus had a "hermaphroditic position,"[83] fusing the two tendencies which elsewhere developed in total, and hostile, isolation.

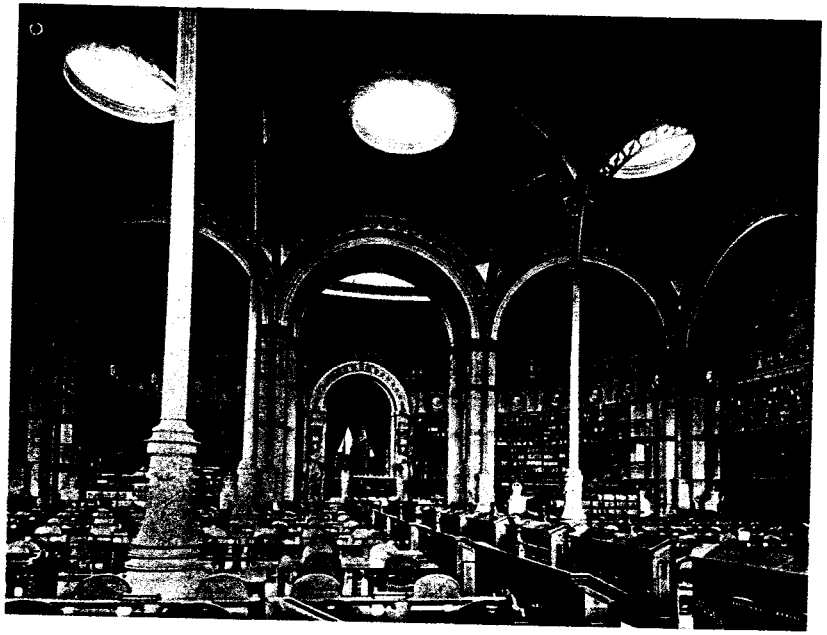
It was the engineers who, together with workers, gave shape to the "new" nature of industrial forms: railroads,[84] machines,[85] and bridges. Benjamin cites Sigfried Giedion: "'It should be noted that the marvelous aspects which the new construction out of iron afforded the cities [. . .] for a long time were accessible to workers and engineers exclusively.'"[86] Sharing Giedion's enthusiasm for



5.4 Pont Transbordeur, Marseilles, built 1905.

these "marvelous aspects," Benjamin contrasts the "ornamental style" of the architects (which he connects with "boredom"[87]) to Giedion's "excellent examples" of bridge scaffolding. Referring to Giedion's photograph of the Pont Transbordeur in Marseilles (figure 5.4), he writes the word: "Marxism. For who else but engineers and proletarians at that time took the steps that alone revealed fully that which was new and decisive about these constructions, the feeling of space?"[88]

Throughout the nineteenth century, the "fine art" of architecture defensively held itself back from engineering innovations: "'Those whose aesthetic conscience was particularly sensitive hurled out from the altar of art curse after curse upon the building engineers.'"[89] The accepted nineteenth-century architectural "style" remained oriented toward the preindustrial past, and the most respected style was neoclassicism. "'In the nineteenth century ancient Greek architecture again bloomed in its old purity'" —at least so it appeared to what Benjamin called the "vulgar consciousness" of the time.[90] When iron *was* used for scaffolding, it was given a "stone covering"[91] so that it was visible only from the



5.5 Main Reading Room, Bibliothèque Nationale, built by Henri Labrouste, 1868 (top).

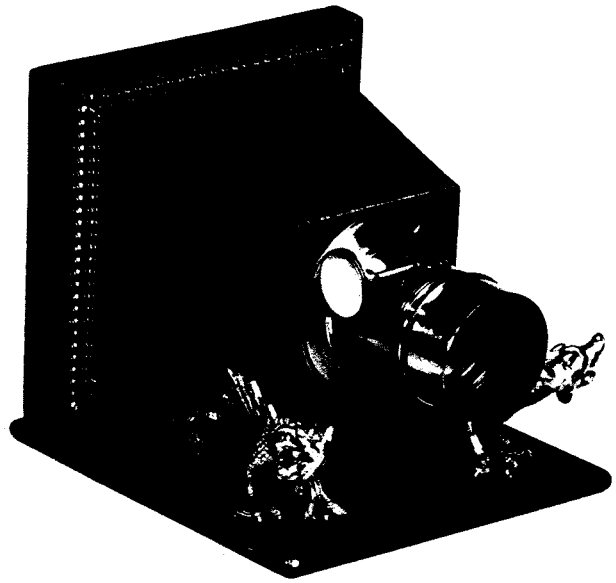
5.6 Avenue de l'Opera, late nineteenth century (bottom).

interior (figure 5.5), or used only for decorative effect. "'Henri Labrouste, artist of restrained and austere talents, inaugurated successfully the ornamental use of iron in the construction of the Bibliothèque Sainte-Genevieve [1850s] and the Bibliothèque Nationale [1860s].'"[92] On exterior facades (figure 5.6), iron was used in continuous balconies as surface design in direct contradiction to the new potential for verticality, illustrating "the tendency, again and again in the nineteenth century, to ennoble technical exigencies with artistic aims."[93]

> "The sensitivities of [architects] demanded that the ever-stronger horizontal tendency of the house . . . come to expression . . . And they found the means in connection with the traditional iron balcony. They introduced it on one or two floors over the whole width of the front [. . .]. When house appeared next to house, these balcony gratings fused into one another and strengthened the impression of a street wall [. . .]."[94]

Iron, known to humankind since prehistory, was rapidly transformed from "'cast iron to wrought iron to ingot steel,'" demonstrating its "'unlimited possibilities.'"[95] Exclaimed Benjamin: "Iron as revolutionary building material!"[96] But architects, still trained in the tradition of Alberti, brought to any "artificial" form of iron "'a certain mistrust precisely because it was not immediately present in nature.'"[97] Moreover, they polemicized against the mathematics of static physics that was the essential tool of engineers, claiming mathematics was "'powerless to assure the solidarity of buildings.'"[98]

Ostracized from the dictates of "good taste," engineering submitted to the dictates of practical use.[99] "'The source of all architecture out of iron and glass in the contemporary sense is the greenhouse.'"[100] Such "houses for plants" were the model for Paxton's plan of the Crystal Palace (executed by engineers rather than architects).[101] Subsequent exposition halls imitated Paxton's design, as metaphorical "hothouses" for the new machinery.[102] It was in buildings for the new mass culture that the principle of iron and glass construction proliferated, at first "'under the banner of purely utilitarian buildings'": "iron halls" were built as warehouses, workshops, and factories,[103] covered marketplaces (*Les Halles*) and railroad stations (*Garde de l'Est*). As practical, protective shelters for a mass public, iron halls well suited the "'need for unbroken space,'"[104] because of the expanse such construction allowed. Ben-



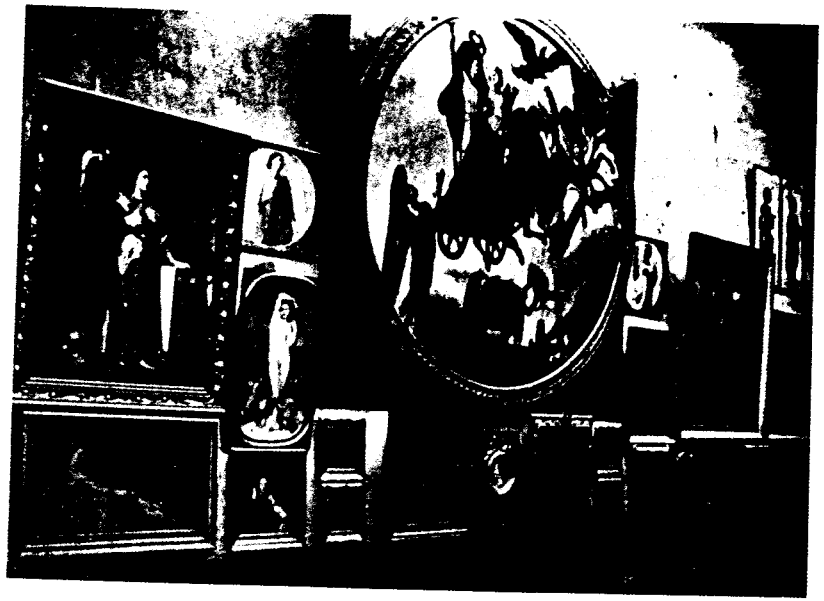
5.7 Camera by Bourguin in the shape of a truncated pyramid, flanked by bronze dragons that serve only to make the apparatus heavier and more ornate, Paris, ca. 1844

jamin noted that these buildings were connected with transitoriness in both the spatial sense (as railroad stations, places of transit) and the temporal one (as galleries for world expositions, typically torn down after they closed).

Spared the self-conscious mediation of "art," such structures settled into the collective imagination in an unconscious form, as buildings for use rather than contemplation—at least for a time. Ultimately, iron and glass construction, having bowed to the challenge of architectural style, itself became one, and began (predictably) to think of emulating the past:

"By 1878, it was believed that salvation could be found in iron architecture: Its vertical aspiration [. . .] the preference for over-filled spaces and the lightness of the visible skeleton fanned hopes in the birth of a style that would revive the essence of Gothic genius [. . .]."[105]

The 1889 Paris Exposition was heralded as the "'triumph of iron.'"[106] Built for it was the Gallery of Machines (dismantled in 1910 "'out of artistic sadism'"[107]) and the Eiffel Tower, the latter an "incomparable" monument to the new "heroic age of technology,"[108] which survived after the close of the fair because of



5.8 Photograph of the Ingres Gallery of Painting, Exposition Universelle, Paris, 1855

its utility as a tower for wireless transmission.[109] Assembled by riveting together sectional iron pieces, the Eiffel Tower, for all its lacelike effects, employed the same principle of construction as railroad tracks, and anticipated skyscrapers directly.[110] "Modernism" in architecture had arrived. The Eiffel Tower was an enormous popular success; but still the "artists" protested:

"We come, writers, painters, sculptors, architects . . . in the name of French art and history that are both threatened, to protest against the erection in the very heart of our capital of the needless and monstrous Eiffel Tower . . . overwhelming with its barbarous mass Notre Dame, the Sainte-Chapelle, the Tour Saint-Jacques, all our monuments humiliated, all our architectural works diminished."[111]

5

The invention of photography, with its exact rendering of nature, enabled technology to overtake artists at their own task, and undermined the uniqueness, the one-time-only "aura" of the masterpiece by allowing for the mass reproduction of images.

The first international exposition at which photography was exhibited was held in 1855 in Paris.[112] The invention of photography was prefigured in the 1820s by the dioramas, those glassed-in, three-dimensional scenes of figures in a realistic setting which, "by means of technical artifice," attempted "a perfect imitation of nature," including the temporal movement of changing daylight, sunsets, or a rising moon.[113] The dioramas mimicked reality so successfully that the painter David urged his students to make studies of nature from them.[114] Dioramas (and subsequent cosmoramas, pleoramas, panoramas, and diaphanoramas,[115] as well as wax-figure cabinets)[116] were the "too early" precursors of photography[117] and film[118] just as the arcades (in which they were frequently found) were too early anticipations of modern architecture. "Just as architecture begins to outgrow art with iron construction, so painting does the same through the panoramas."[119]

Benjamin appreciated the lithographer A. J. Wiertz, whose early essay on photography "ascribes to it the philosophical enlightenment of painting [. . .] in a political sense": images become intellectually reflective and thereby "agitational."[120] Wiertz wrote: "'Do not think that daguerreotype kills art. No, it kills the work of patience; it renders homage to the work of thought,'" and he carried this principle over into his own work, believing that ultimately photography and art would work together.[121]

With photography, the artist's attempt to replicate nature was made scientific.[122] It extended the human sense of sight in a way commensurate with Marx's idea in the 1844, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts" that the human senses in their "'true, anthropological [i.e., social] nature'" are "'nature as it comes to be through industry,'"[123] even if such nature, due to "'private property,'" now exists only in "'alienated form.'"[124] That the "'human eye'" perceives differently than the "'crude, nonhuman eye'"[125] is demonstrated by photography, presenting to our vision new discoveries about nature, and not merely beautiful images. François Arago, speaking in the 1850s on the place of photography in the history of technology, "prophesizes its scientific application—whereupon the artists [predictably missing the point] begin to debate its artistic value."[126]

Photography secularized the image by bringing it up close. On the photography exhibit of the 1855 Paris Exposition:

"The public crowded into the exhibitions, standing before countless portraits of famous and celebrated personalities, and one can imagine what it meant in that epoch that one could see the famed personages of the theatre, the podium, in short of public life, at whom until now one had only been able to gaze in wonder from a distance."[127]

From the start, photography was part of popular culture. Pioneers like Nadar expanded its subject matter, taking a hundred exposures of Paris' catacombs and sewers,[128] and including all social classes and ranks in his portraiture.[129] The photographic method encouraged the practice of amateurs, so that the line between artist and public began to blur. Arago reported to the Chamber in 1851 on the effects of the invention:

"'[. . . T]he opticians' shops were besieged; there were not enough lenses, not enough dark rooms to satisfy the zeal of so many eager amateurs. The sun sinking on the horizon was followed with a gaze of regret, taking with it the raw material of the experiment. But on the following day you could see great numbers of experimenters at their windows in the first hours of daylight, striving with every kind of nervous precaution to induce onto the prepared plaques images of the nearby dormer window, or the view of a population of chimneys.'"[130]

Photography democratized the reception of visual images by bringing even art masterpieces to a mass audience.[131] Benjamin believed this democratization of production and reception as well as the non-"auratic," scientific approach to objects were tendencies intrinsic to the medium,[132] and he considered them progressive.[133] Because photography intruded so decisively upon the image preserve of painters, it inevitably challenged and changed the way the latter went about their work. Arago wrote:

"Whoever has just once in his life covered his skin with the magic cloak of photography and peered into the camera in order to see there those wonderful miniature reproductions of natural images must have been . . . struck by the question of what, indeed, will our modern painting come to once photography has succeeded in fixing colors just as permanently as it now does forms."[134]

Defenders of artists insisted that it was "impossible for a human countenance to be captured by machine."[135] Yet portraits were precisely the genre most vulnerable to the encroachments of photography, even if they changed what such portraits recorded: "What makes the first photographs so incomparable is perhaps this: that

they represent the first image of the encounter of machine and human being."[136] Artists asserted the superiority of their trade, but their unconscious response was an acknowledgment of vulnerability. "Apparent symptom of a radical displacement [*Verschiebung*]: painting must put up with being judged by the standard of photography."[137] Artists began to move in directions in which photography could not (yet) compete:

> The paintings of Delacroix avoid competition with photography not only by their power of color but—there was then no action photography—by the stormy movement of their subjects. Thus it was possible for him to be kindly disposed toward photography.[138]

And subsequently: "As Impressionism gives way to Cubism, painting has created a domain into which photography at the outset cannot follow."[139]

Thus painters attempted to defend themselves against the new technology. They thereby missed the real threat to their cultural creativity, the effects of the capitalist market. Already in the early arcades, the window arrangements of commodities "displayed art in service of the salesman."[140] In the course of his research, Benjamin found a lithograph depicting the beginning of art as advertising:

> [. . .] a painter who makes his way forward with two yard-long, narrow planks, on each of which he has painted several garnishings and arrangements of meat products. Title: "Misery and the arts." "Dedicated to Monsieur the Butcher." Caption: "The man of art within the impediments of his trade."[141]

Another showed the proletarianization of artistic production in terms of worker exploitation:

> Lithograph: A poor devil looks on sadly as a young man signs the picture that the former has painted. Title: "The artist and the amateur of the nineteenth century." Caption: "It is by me, seeing that I sign it."[142]

Due to the distorting effects of capitalist social relations, the mass culture in which art and technology converged did so to the detriment of both. On the side of art, production methods began to resemble those of any commodity: Needing to compete with photography, artists were forced to speed up production, mimic mechanized reproduction by hand, and turn out "individual" portraits with a rapidity that rendered only what was typical about the sub-

5.9 Studio photograph of Walter Benjamin and his brother George as "Alpinists," ca. 1900.

ject, while the new style of "genre paintings" was based on the concept of repeatability. On the side of photography (which in portraiture clearly had the competitive edge[143]) the limitless reproduction of images extended the sphere of market society "enormously," which in turn encouraged "modish variations of camera techniques" in order to increase sales.[144] Moreover, the retrogressive canons of artistic style induced photographers to be more "painterly" in their images (figure 5.9), placing subjects before "picturesque," backdrops, utilizing props, and retouching and otherwise "embellishing" the image in the name of aesthetic standards.[145]

6

Nowhere were the distorting effects of capitalism clearer than in the realm of literary production. Here the threat to traditional art

5.10 "Literature being reeled off and sold in chunks"—Grandville, 1844.

forms came from the technology of rapid printing,[146] and from the journalistic style that emerged as the consequence of the mushrooming of mass newspapers. In "The Author as Producer" (1934),[147] Benjamin describes the potential effects of new literary technologies making it clear that he considers them progressive in the political sense because they tend to create a democratic forum for information and lower the boundary between literary producer and audience[148]; and because they destroy the old notion of individual artistic genius and completed, self-contained "works," replacing the concept of the "masterpiece" with a political notion of writing as "intervention" which has an "organizing function."[149] The writer's most important strategic task is less to fill the new literary forms with revolutionary content than to develop the revolutionary potential of the forms themselves. So long as the mass press "still belongs to capital," however, this task is riddled with "insoluble antinomies."[150] "The newspaper is the scene of this literary confusion."[151] Capitalist journalism commodifies writing, treating it as a product to be consumed by a passive audience. In a context where the traditional standards of "literature" are stubbornly clung to, the result is a "decline of writing," a "debasement of the word."[152] But in the "unselective" assembling of readers and facts, and by needing to cater to the "smoldering impatience" of the readers who, "excluded, believe that they have the right to speak out in their own interests,"[153] a "dialectical moment is concealed: The decline of writing in the bourgeois press proves to be the source of its regeneration under socialism."[154] Benjamin defines the situation of the socialist press (equating it with the actually existing press in the Soviet Union) as one in which the worker, as "expert," becomes literate in an active sense. He or she "gains access to authorship," the qualifications for which thus become "public property"; "living conditions" themselves become "literature," while the latter loses relevance as a purely aesthetic form.[155]

The *Passagen-Werk* material gives evidence from the early years of industrial capitalism of both positive and negative poles of this dialectic as they appear, fully entangled, in the historical phenomena themselves. Benjamin is particularly concerned with the transformation of literary works into commodities,[156] and the effects of capitalist relations on the production process. He finds prototypical the production innovations of the dramatist Eugène Scribe:

"While he made fun of the great industrialists and men of money, he learned from them the secret of their success. It did not escape his sharp eye that all wealth in essence rests on the art of having others work for us and thus, a pathbreaking genius, he transferred the fundamental principle of the division of labor from the workshops of fashion tailors, cabinetmakers, and steel-spring factories, into studios for the dramatic artist, who before this reform, with one head and one pen, still only earned the proletarian salary of an isolated worker."[157]

But regardless of salary, the writers within these studio workshops were "proletarian" now in the literal sense of the word, as they had lost control over the production apparatus. And if salaries of worker-writers rose, Scribe's wealth as the owner of their labor power grew exponentially:

Scribe chose the material, he ordered the plot in its broad outlines, indicated the special effects and brilliant exits, and his apprentices set dialogue or small verses thereto. If they made progress, then naming their name in the title (next to that of the firm) was their adequate payment, until the best of them became independent and produced works with their own hand, perhaps also attaching new helpers to themselves. Thus, and with the protection of the French publishing laws, Scribe became a millionaire several times over.[158]

Alexandre Dumas, similarly, was less a novelist than the owner of a "factory of novels"[159] in which other writers mass produced "his" works. Dumas boasted of producing four hundred novels and thirty-five dramas in twenty years, in a process that "'permitted 8,160 persons to earn a livelihood.'"[160]

"Who knows the titles of all the books M. Dumas has signed his name to? Does he know them himself? If he doesn't keep a double register with debits and credits, he has no doubt forgotten . . . more than one of those children for whom he is the legal father or natural father, or godfather. The productions of these last months have not been less than thirty volumes."[161]

Before mid-century, newspapers were still too expensive to allow for mass readership.

Because of the rareness of newspapers, one read them in groups at the cafés. Otherwise they could be obtained only by subscription, which cost 80 francs per year. In 1824 the twelve most widely distributed newspapers had altogether about 56,000 subscriptions. Indeed, the liberals as well as the royalists were interested in keeping the lower classes away from newspapers.[162]

In 1828, journals were first brought within the grasp of the lower classes, a potentially democratic change[163] that was, however, made possible by precisely that force which began to transform news information into a commodity: paid advertising. At first it was literature itself that was advertised, in the form of unsolicited literary reviews.[164] The next step was to generalize the principle:

The thought of using a newspaper insert to advertise not only books but industrial products, was that of a certain Dr. Veron, who did so well in this way with his *pâte de Regnauld*, a cold medicine, that on an investment of 17,000 francs he received a return of 100,000.[165]

Along with advertising inserts and single issue sales, the editor Emile de Giradin introduced the "feuilleton," a special section in mass newspapers for literature and reviews in which novels appeared serially prior to their publication as books.[166] This format, along with the literary periodicals and reviews that proliferated by mid-century,[167] had significant repercussions on literary form, resulting in essay treatments, short stories, or serial novels. Under capitalist relations, style adapted to the exigencies of the medium: "There were feuilleton honoraria of up to 2 francs per line. Many authors wrote just dialogue as much as possible, in order to make money on the partially empty lines."[168]

The new mass readership drew authors into national politics as well.[169] Benjamin searches out the origins of this phenomenon, unique in our own era, whereby cultural producers, as popular entertainers, became mass politicians (Lamartine, Chateaubriand, Sue, Hugo), not always (or indeed not usually) with the most enlightened results. The philosophical idealism[170] entrenched in bourgeois literature carried over into political positions. Balzac "'deplored the downfall of the Bourbons, which signified to him the loss of the arts,'"[171] and advocated peasant "socialism" along the lines of a reestablished feudalism.[172] Chateaubriand made the political stance of "'vague sadness'" a fashion.[173] Lamartine exhorted patriotism over socialism,[174] employing his poetic rhetoric for nationalist glorification "'as if he had made it his job,'" so one contemporary criticized him, "'to prove the truth of Plato's statement that poets should be thrown out of the Republic [. . .].'"[175]

Those authors first in a position to speak to the masses did not speak *for* the masses,[176] at least not in a way that would make it

possible for them to understand their objective historical situation, because as writers, they did not understand their own. Victor Hugo, whose fiction documented accurately the suffering of the urban poor,[177] is exemplary. Although in November 1848, Hugo cast his vote against General Cavignac's repression of the workers' June revolt,[178] he subsequently voted "'consistently with the right',"[179] and gave his "enthusiastic endorsement" to Louis Napoleon as presidential candidate,[180] hoping (in vain) to become the latter's Minister of Education.[181] Equating words themselves with revolution,[182] Hugo exemplified the new significance of literature for political propaganda as an aspect of the phantasmagoria of mass politics. His unreliable political judgment was not unique among writers. Balzac, an opponent of the breakup of landed estates, saw no other cure for petty-bourgeois hoarding than the contradictory position of turning them into small landholders.[183] Alexandre Dumas was offered money by the government in 1846 to go to Algiers and write a book that would spread among his five million French readers "'a taste for colonization.'"[184] Lamartine, moved to provide the masses with the rhetoric of "'a single idea,' 'a conviction'" around which they could rally,[185] placed his literary skills at the services of the state. The cognitive strength of these writers was limited to describing social appearances, not uncovering the social tendencies that underlay them, and that were affecting their own conditions of production so deeply.

One has only to regard the format of a nineteenth-century newspaper (figure 5.11), in which the feuilleton occupied the bottom quarter of the front page, to see, literally, how thin was the line between political fact and literary fiction. News stories were literary constructions; feuilleton novelists used news stories as content. The tendency of mass media is to render the distinction between art and politics meaningless. Benjamin was vitally concerned with what happens when the two realms merge, as he believed they were bound to, due to the "[. . .] massive melting-down process of literary forms, a process in which many of the oppositions in which we have been accustomed to think may lose their relevance."[186] At issue is not whether the line is crossed, but how. Benjamin sees two possibilities: Either (as was the case with Lamartine, Hugo, etc.), the new technologies of literary reproduction are used by writers as the means for a rhetorical representation of reality that slips into


Le Petit Journal

QUOTIDIEN

LES VOLEURS DE NÈGRES

5.11 Front page of *Le Petit Journal*, September 24, 1869.

political propaganda,[187] or, by focusing on these new technological forms themselves, writers begin to illuminate both their emancipatory potential, and the political realities that presently distort their effects. The choice is between swaying the public or educating it, between political manipulation or technical awareness. The latter politicizes not so much through an elaboration of the deficiencies in the present social order as through demonstrating that this order constrains the means that already exist to rectify them.[188]

But in the nineteenth century, artists and writers generally did not understand the positive potential of the new technologies for cultural production any more clearly than they did the dangers of using these technologies to aestheticize mass politics. Balzac pronounced newspapers as "'"deadly to the existence of modern writers."'"[189] Gautier (like Balzac, a monarchist) praised Charles I's suppression of the press, claiming that it "'"rendered a great service to the arts and to civilization"'":

"'Newspapers are of the species of courtiers or horse dealers who interpose themselves between the artists and the public, between the king and the people... their perpetual barking... hurls such mistrust... into the mind that... royalty and poetry, the two grandest things in the world, become impossible.'"[190]

Architects, as we have seen, distrusted mathematics. But engineers were no more clairvoyant, coming only "slowly" to "new methods of fabrication."[191] And if artists preached "art for art's sake," and, scorning the new technology, insisted: "'A drama is not a railroad,'"[192] it was also true "that the very Arago who reported the famous positive evaluation of [photography], reported in the same year [...] a negative evaluation of the railroad construction planned by the government."[193] ("'Among other arguments, the difference in temperature at the entrance and exits to the tunnels would, it was said, lead to fatal heat and chills.'"[194]) But was the "progressive" alternative simply to make an art object of railroads themselves?

Theatre du Luxembourg, 30 December 1837: "A locomotive with 'several elegant wagons' appears on the stage."[195]

7

The images of nineteenth-century architecture *and* engineering, painting *and* photography, literature *and* journalism were a tangle of both anticipatory and fettering elements. It was not surprising that in the darkness of the lived moment, neither artist nor technician was able to differentiate clearly between the two. Granted, technology was inherently progressive, promising socialist forms of living and culture; but so long as its development was appropriated for the purposes of capitalism and the state, it produced only reified dream images of that promise, a phantasmagoria of the "new nature." Similarly, even if the industrial reproduction of artistic and literary forms was inherently democratic, so long as, under commodity production, culture was produced as manipulation rather than enlightenment, fostering passive consumption rather than active collaboration, the democratic potential of mass culture remained unrealized.

Neither technician nor artist was to be affirmed unequivocably. Both, lacking control over the means of production,[196] submitted to the demands of the market and thereby helped to perpetuate the nonidentity between social utility and capitalist profitability. As producers of strategic beautification or of patriotic oration, both served the interests of political reaction.[197] Both were caught up in the dream-state of technology. At the same time, both managed to express progressive elements in their work in spite of it. Benjamin concludes: "The attempt to draw out a systematic confrontation between art and photography must fail"; rather, as was the case in other areas of cultural production, it could best be understood as "a moment in the confrontation between art and technology which history has produced"[198]—but which "history" would not automatically resolve: The *Ecole des beaux arts* and *Ecole polytechnique* were not the thesis and antithesis of a historical process. The rivalry between them was a symptom of that process, not itself the dialectical working out of its contradictions. Technology was a challenge to art; forces of production were in contradiction with relations of production. But these two facts could not be neatly superimposed so that the terms of the former lined up unequivocably on the sides of progress and reaction.

Moreover, given the present mode of production, all "syntheses"

between art and technology were premature. Within Benjamin's intellectual landscape, they belonged to the anticipatory realm of dreams. The sheltering arcades were the first modern architecture for the public. But they were also the first consumer "dream houses," placed at the service of commodity worship. In the nineteenth century, when the tempo of technological transformations threatened to outstrip the capacity of art to adapt itself to them, advertising became the means of reestablishing a link between technology's forces and social desires: "The advertisement is the cunning with which the dream imposed itself upon industry."[199] At the same time, the development of advertising was symptomatic of the transformation of information into propaganda, so that in commercial art fantasy only "prepares" itself to become socially "practical" in a positive sense.[200] Similarly, before photography can obtain a "revolutionary use-value," the photographer must "rescue" the image from "the fashions of commerce," with the proper caption.[201] In the feuilleton, writers find their rightful place as communicators to a mass audience and as commentators on everyday life, but the commercial genres of their literature—physiognomies of the crowd, panoramas of the boulevard, the reveries of the flâneur—transform reality into an object that can be consumed passively, pleasurably, and directly in its dream form,[202] rather than "refunctioning" the communication apparatus into a tool that will make it possible to wake up from the dream. Given the ambivalence of the phenomena, those artworks that eschewed the new social pressures and espoused the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art* were as much to be redeemed as, for different reasons, the tendency of tacking aesthetic "masks" onto the new forms. The latter were warning signs that fantasy's new social usefulness did not make its utopian aspect superfluous. In short, the liquidation of traditional art would remain premature, so long as its utopian promise was left unrealized.

If the situation had been simple, if art and technology *had* been the opposing poles of a historical dialectic within the superstructure, then there would have been nothing easier than their "synthesis." The new culture would emerge as a process of aestheticizing technology, or conversely, of proclaiming technology as art. Both these forms were attempted in the early twentieth century, the first by *Jugendstil*, which strove to renew art from the "form-treasures of

technology"[203] and to "stylize" them "ornamentally"[204] as natural symbols; the second by Futurism which, pronouncing technology beautiful, wished to raise it to an art form in itself. Benjamin criticizes them on the same grounds: "The reactionary attempt to release technologically determined forms from their functional contexts and to reify them as natural constants—i.e., to stylize them—occurred similarly in *Jugendstil* and later in Futurism."[205]

Despite Adorno's reservations, Benjamin's theory of mass culture did provide criteria for a critique of cultural production under capitalism. But it also identified how in spite of these conditions, socialist imagination could come—indeed, was coming into being. The cultural transformation which Benjamin was investigating is not to be thought of simply as a new aesthetic style. It involves giving up the ingrained habit of thinking in terms of the subjective fantasy of art versus the objective material forms of reality. The dialectic which was "no less visible" in the superstructure than in the substructure would transform the very way these two societal components were related. The binary of substructure and superstructure would itself be drawn into the "melting-down process."[206]

8

Recall that the collective fantasy released at the beginning of the new era of industrialism reaches back to an ur-past. In the temporal dimension, images of the ancient, mythic origins of Western civilization become prominent (one manifestation of which is neoclassicism). Materially, the technologically produced "new" nature appears in the fantastic form of the old, organic nature. The *Passagen-Werk* gives repeated documentation of how the modernity that was emerging in the nineteenth century evoked both of these realms, in what might seem to be a collective expression of nostalgia for the past and the outmoded. But Benjamin leads us to understand a different motivation. On the one hand, it is an "attempt to master the new experiences of the city" and of technology "in the frame of the old, traditional ones of nature"[207] and of myth. On the other hand, it is the distorted form of the dream "wish," which is not to redeem the past, but to redeem the desire for utopia to which humanity has persistently given expression. This utopia is none

other than the communist goal stated by Marx in the 1844 "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts"[208]: the harmonious reconciliation of subject and object through the humanization of nature and the naturalization of humanity, and it is in fact an ur-historical motif in both Biblical and classical myth. Greek antiquity, no heaven-on-earth in reality, achieved such a reconciliation symbolically in its cultural forms. To replicate these forms, however, as if some "truth" were eternally present within them, denies the historical particularly which is essential to all truth. Rather, the ur-utopian themes are to be rediscovered not merely symbolically, as aesthetic ornamentation, but actually, in matter's most modern configurations.

It is with the new, technological nature that human beings must be reconciled. This is the goal of socialist culture, and the meaning of Benjamin's question, already cited:

> When and how will the worlds of form that have arisen in mechanics, in film, machine construction and the new physics, and that have overpowered us without our being aware of it, make what is natural in them clear to us? When will the condition of society be reached in which these forms or those that have arisen from them open themselves up to us as natural forms?[209]

The paradox is that precisely by giving up nostalgic mimicking of the past and paying strict attention to the new nature, the ur-images are reanimated. Such is the logic of historical images, in which collective wish images are negated, surpassed, and at the same time dialectically redeemed. This logic does not form a discursive system in a Hegelian sense. The moment of sublation reveals itself visually, in an instantaneous flash[210] wherein the old is illuminated precisely at the moment of its disappearance. This *fleeting* image of truth "is not a process of exposure which destroys the secret, but a revelation which does it justice."[211]

9

Can such a cognitive experience (which, literally, *e-ducates* our imagination, leading it out of its still mythic stage) be illustrated in the context of the present discussion? By way of conclusion, here are two such attempts, demonstrating both the moment of critical negation in the dialectics of seeing that exposes the ideology of

bourgeois culture, and the moment of redemption, as a fleeting revelation of truth. The first illustration, constructed out of extremes of archaic and modern, makes visible the difference between the repetition of the past and its redemption. In the second, the new nature flashes together with the old in an anticipatory image of humanity and nature reconciled.

Archaic/Modern

Not only architectural tastes were dominated by neoclassical aesthetics in the nineteenth century. Bourgeois theater enthusiastically restaged the ancient Greek tragedies, defining "classics" as those works, the truth of which was untouched by historical passing. In the genre of caricature (more receptive to the new technologies of lithographic reproduction due to its lower status as an art form) the artist Honoré Daumier produced images of his own class[212] which, in making the bourgeois subject their object, lent to his visual representations "'a sort of philosophical operation.'"[213] His humor provided the critical distance necessary to recognize the pretentions of the bourgeois cloak of antiquity.[214] Daumier showed neoclassicism to be not the recurrence of an eternally valid form, but a peculiarly bourgeois style of historical distortion. He depicted the bourgeoisie *depicting* antiquity, in a way that articulated the former's transiency, not the latter's permanence (figures 5.12 and 5.13). Baudelaire suggested as the motto for a book by Daumier on ancient history: "Who will deliver us from the Greeks and the Romans?"—and he recognized in this artist a fellow modernist because of it. He wrote:

> "Daumier swoops down brutally on antiquity and mythology and spits on it. And the impassioned Achilles, the prudent Ulysses, the wise Penelope, and that great ninny Telemachus, and beautiful Helen who loses Troy, and steaming Sappho, patron of hysterics, and ultimately everyone, has been shown to us in a comic ugliness that recalls those old carcasses of actors of the classic theater who take a pinch of snuff behind the scenes."[215]

Daumier's images provide the critical negation of bourgeois classicism. But it is to the "dramatic laboratory" of Brecht's epic theater, the most technically experimental of contemporary dramatic forms,

5.12 "Bernice, Titus, and Antiochus," Honore Daumier, from *Le Charivari*, 1839 (top).

5.13 "The Maidens of Penelope," Honoré Daumier, from the cycle *Ulysses*, 1852 (bottom).

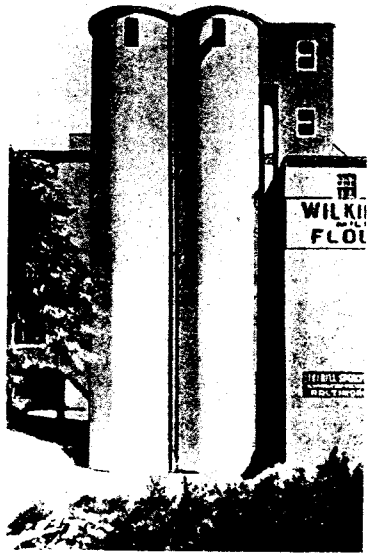
that we must look for a reanimation of the *scientific* power of classical theater—as Benjamin's defense of Brecht makes clear:

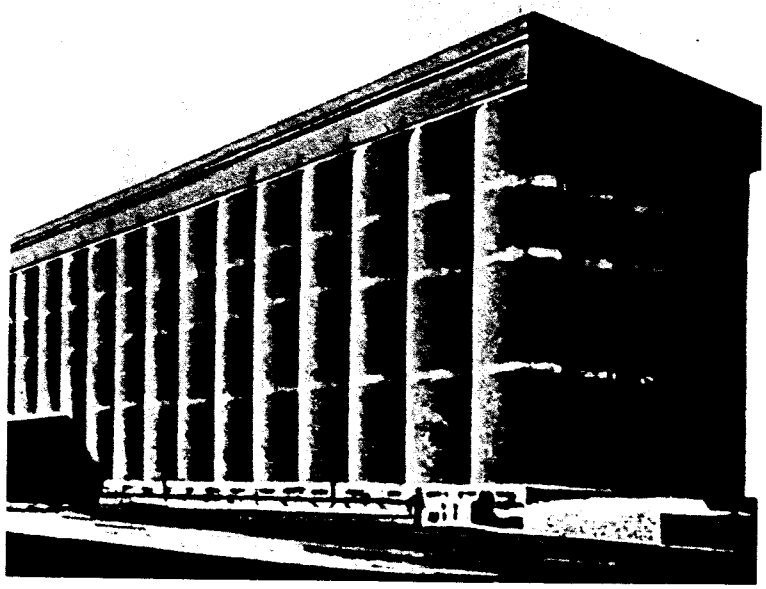
> [Brecht . . .] goes back, in a new way, to the theater's greatest and most ancient opportunity: the opportunity to expose the present. In the center of his experiments is man. The man of today; a reduced man therefore, a man kept on ice in a cold world. But since he is the only one we have, it is in our interest to know him. He is subjected to tests and observations. [. . .] Constructing out of the smallest elements of human behavior that which in Aristotelian drama is called "action"—this is the purpose of epic theater.[216]

Similarly, in technological structures, classical form returns, a fact of which Le Corbusier, a founder of architectural modernism, was aware. Benjamin clearly affirmed the new architecture as the (historically *transient*) form adequate to the period of transition. He wrote: "In the first third of the last century no one yet had an inkling of how one must build with glass and iron. The problem has long since been resolved by hangars and silos."[217] As if to illustrate this point, the plates that accompanied a 1923 edition of Le Corbusier's collected articles included photographs of hangars and silos. Moreover, they juxtaposed such modern forms to the buildings of antiquity, in order to demonstrate how architects of the contemporary era, rather than imitating antiquity intentionally, take their lead from the engineers who, unwittingly, have discovered its forms anew (figures 5.14–5.17). Benjamin asks rhetorically: "Do not all great triumphs in the area of form come into existence [. . .] as technological discoveries?"[218]

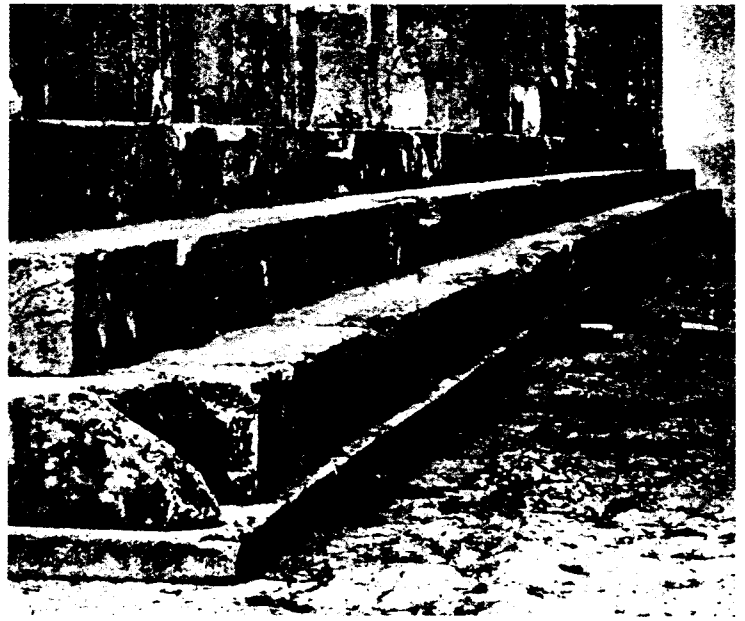
Old Nature/New Nature

The earliest *Passagen-Werk* notes state that the work of Grandville is to be "compared with the phenomenology of Hegel."[219] In fact this graphic artist (whom Surrealists as well as silent filmmakers recognized as their precursor) made visible the "ambivalence between the utopian and cynical element"[220] in the bourgeois idealist attempt to subsume nature under its own, subjective categories. His images depict nature as pure subjectivity in its most specific, bourgeois-historical form, that is, as commodity. A contemporary of Marx, Grandville's "cosmology of fashion" portrays nature decked out in the latest styles as so many "specialty items."[221]



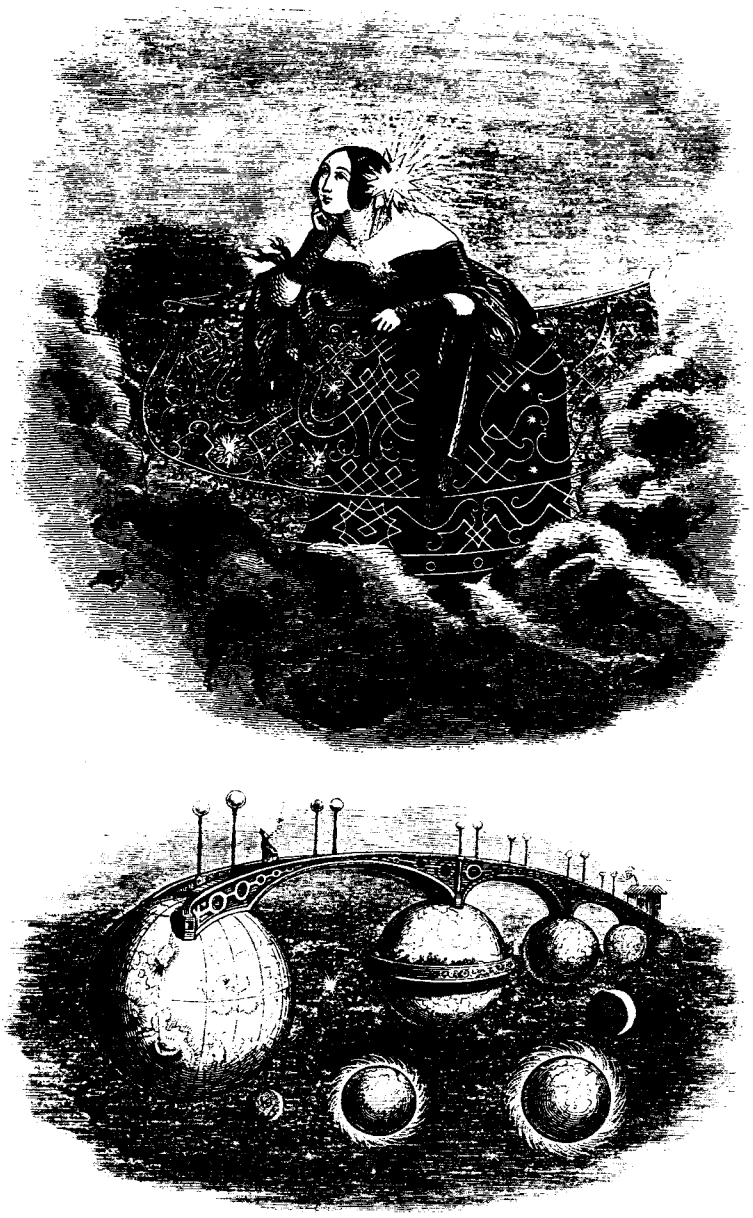


5.14 and 5.15 Contemporary grain elevators (Le Corbusier).



5.16 and 5.17 Details of the Parthenon (Le Corbusier).

5.18 "Flowers and fruit rejoice in the coming of spring"—Grandville, 1844.



5.19 "Venus as an evening star"—Grandville, 1844 (top).

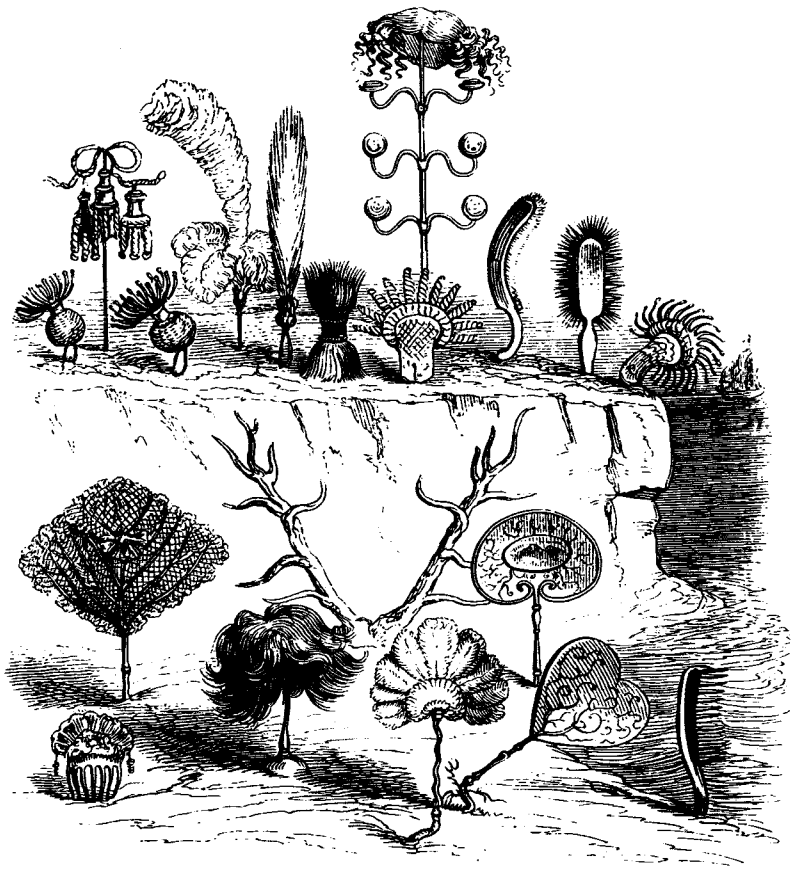
5.20 "An interplanetary bridge; Saturn's ring is an iron balcony"—Grandville, 1844 (bottom).

5.21 "A dog walking his man"—Grandville, 1844.

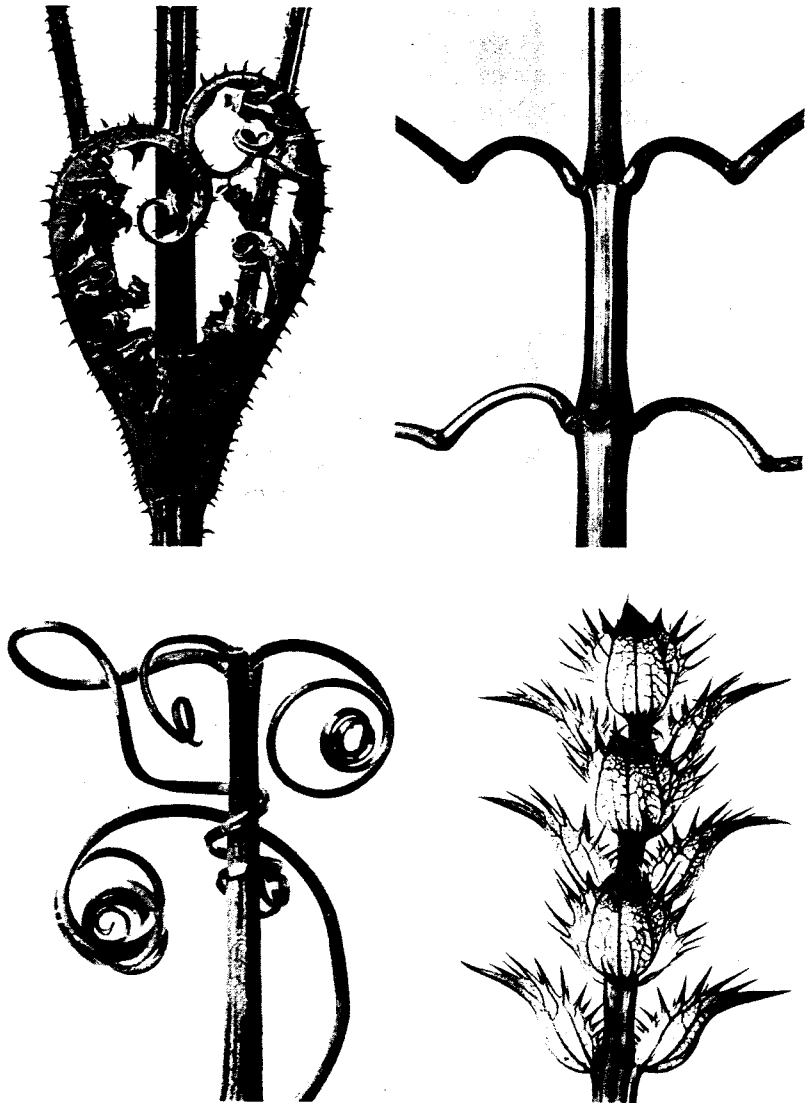
Grandville "brings well to expression what Marx calls the 'theological capers' of commodities,"[222] and, pursuing commodity fetishism "to its extremes, reveals its nature."[223] In his work the image of humanity reconciled with nature is given a cynical twist: Nature imitates humanity's fetishized forms as "so many parodies by nature on the history of humanity."[224] "Grandville's fantasies transfer commodity-character onto the universe. They modernize it."[225] Comets, planets,[226] flowers, the moon and evening star are animated, only to receive the "human" attribute of being transformed into a commodity (figures 5.18–5.20).[227] But in depicting the "battle between fashion and nature,"[228] Grandville allows nature to gain the upper hand (figure 5.21). An active, rebellious nature takes its revenge on the humans who would fetishize it as a commodity (figure 5.22).

The myth of human omnipotence, the belief that human artifice can dominate nature and recreate the world in its image, is central to the ideology of modern domination. Benjamin names this fantasy (which is believed with deadly seriousness by whose who wield technology's power over others): "childish."[229] Grandville depicts it, when, "God knows, not gently," he stamps human characteristics onto nature, practicing that "graphic sadism" which would

5.22 "Fish fishing for people, using various desirable items as bait"—Grandville, 1844.



5.23 "The marine life collection, showing that underwater plants and animals are based on forms invented by man—fans, wigs, combs, brushes, etc."—Grandville, 1844.



5.24, 5.25, 5.26, 5.27 Photographs of plants as ur-forms of art, Karl Blossfeldt, 1928.

become the "fundamental principle" of the advertising image.[230] Grandville's caricatures mimic the hubris of a humanity so puffed up with its new achievements that it sees itself as the source of all creation and brutally imagines the old nature totally subsumed under *its* forms (figure 5.23).

But this cognitive experience is inverted when the new technique of photographic enlargement (figures 5.24-5.27) shows us with what cunning nature, anticipating the forms of human technology, has been allied with us all along! Photography thereby takes us like "Liliputians" into a land of gigantic and "fraternal" organic plant forms,[231] wrote Benjamin in his review of Karl Blossfeldt's *Urformen der Kunst* (*Ur-forms of Art*) in 1928. Comparing Blossfeldt to Grandville, Benjamin commented:

> Is it not remarkable that here another principle of advertising, the gigantic enlargement of the world of plants is now seen to heal the wounds that caricature delivered to it?"[232]

Here is a use of technology not to dominate nature but to take off the "veil" that our "laziness" has thrown over the old nature, and allow us to see in plant existence "a totally unexpected treasure of analogies and forms."[233]

> Ur-forms of art—yes, granted. Still, what else can these be but the ur-forms of nature?—Forms, that is, that were never merely a model for art, but from the very beginning, ur-forms at work in all that is creative?[234]

6

Historical Nature: Ruin

1

Transitoriness is the key to Benjamin's affirmation of the mythic element in cultural objects, redeeming the wish-images attached to the transitional, "too-early" ur-forms of modern technology as momentary anticipations of utopia. But in the process of commodification, wish image congeals into fetish; the mythic lays claim to eternity. "Petrified nature" (*erstarrte Natur*) characterizes those commodities that comprise the modern phantasmagoria which in turn freezes the history of humanity as if enchanted under a magic spell.[1] But this fetishized nature, too, is transitory. The other side of mass culture's hellish repetition of "the new" is the mortification of matter which is fashionable no longer. The gods grow out of date, their idols disintegrate, their cult places—the arcades themselves—decay. Benjamin notes that the first electric street-lighting (1857) "extinguished the irreproachable luminosity in these passages, which were suddenly harder to find [. . .]."[2] He interprets Zola's novel *Thérèse Raquin*, written a decade later, as an account of "the death of the Paris arcades, the process of decay of an architectural style."[3] Because these decaying structures no longer hold sway over the collective imagination, it is possible to recognize them as the illusory dream images they always were. Precisely the fact that their original aura has disintegrated makes them invaluable didactically:

> To cite an observation of Aragon that constitutes the hub of the problem: That the Passages are what they are here for us [*für uns*], is due to the fact that they in themselves [*an sich*] are no longer.[4]