The Vertical Turn: Topographies of Metropolitan Modernism

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature with a Designated Emphasis in Film Studies in the Graduate Division of the University of California, Berkeley

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Abstract
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This dissertation argues that the dominant vertical orientation of metropolitan modernist culture was put into question above all in response to World War II and the global emergence of the Cold War. While grounded in Comparative Literature and Film Studies, it also engages with interdisciplinary questions of philosophy, history, religion, economics, media studies, urban studies, art, and architecture. The first part demonstrates the growing fascination with vertical height, aspiration and transcendence in modernist aesthetics and everyday life, and the second part focuses on the critical suspicion of such transcendence in literature, film, and theory after World War II. The afterward discusses how this history helps us better understand the more horizontalist rhetoric of globalization and new media that has become dominant since then.

My argument is that, in response to new developments in technology and metropolitan experience over the course of the long twentieth century, trans-Atlantic writers and artists became increasingly interested in vertical ideas of aspiration and transcendence that diverged from both romantic ideas of spiritual inspiration and realist ideas of mimetic reflection. Although there were critics of this modernist vertical turn already during the construction of the Eiffel Tower in 1889, it was put into question above all after World War II, when more postmodern tropes of suspension, circulation and sprawl – and theoretical concepts of deconstruction, immanence, and deterritorialization – began to gain prevalence. After the destruction of European and Asian cities from above, American metropolitanism ascended to the world stage even while its national landscape became more suburban, decentralized, and mass-mediated. During the Cold War “balance of terror,” First World capitalism also became more decentralized as it expanded further into the Third World, and Fordist methods of vertical integration and nationalization began to be replaced by more transnational methods of horizontal integration, production, and distribution. Thus, while the first half of the long twentieth century could be symbolized by the skyscraper and the airplane, the second half has come to be recognized by more horizontal images of suburban sprawl, extra-terrestrial images of zero-gravity in outer space, and multi-linear images of telecommunications networks and media flows. Although distinct, these two historical movements of the twentieth century may be conceptualized as part of an overall geopolitical
turn from European to American dominance, from vertical modernism to horizontal
globalism, and, in terms of metropolitan cultural capital, from Paris to New York. That said,
despite the utility of these broad generalization and terms, I ultimately argue that they also
call for critique.

More specifically, my first chapter, “The Aesthetics of Aspiration,” introduces my
argument that metropolitan modernist writers and artists became interested in ideas of
vertical transcendence in relation to contemporary material developments in urban space,
architecture and aviation. Here I focus on spatial conceptions of urbanism, nationalism and
cosmopolitanism in writings by Guillaume Apollinaire, Franz Kafka, Virginia Woolf, and
James Joyce. My second chapter, “Metropolitan Ascendance and Catastrophe,” begins with a
short history of American architectural verticalization, especially as it was critiqued by John
Dos Passos and Frank Lloyd Wright, before focusing on French writings about New York
City by Fernand Léger, Le Corbusier, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Michel de
Certeau, among others. Here I show how these critics turned from Paris to New York in
order to come to terms with the increasing commercialization, secularization and
Americanization of twentieth-century modernity. In my next chapter, “The Aesthetics of
Suspension,” I show how major post-World War II American novels by Saul Bellow, Joseph
Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, and Thomas Pynchon each responded to wartime violence and
trauma by dispelling the modernist aesthetics of aspiration in favor of new ideas of
historiography, immanence, and “vertical wandering.” My fourth chapter, on “Alfred
Hitchcock and the Displacement of Terror,” focuses on the 1958 film Vertigo, and the post-
war French novel on which it was based, in order to show how the meaning of this
eponymous term was reoriented from the horizontal to the vertical in relation to lingering
anxieties about wartime destruction. Finally, my Afterward, “On the Horizon,” considers
appeals to horizontal equality and flow in more recent discourses of urbanism, globalization,
and new media.
THE VERTICAL TURN
*Topographies of Metropolitan Modernism*

Alexander Calder, “Vertical Constellation With Bomb” (1941)

By Paul Haacke
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Introduction**

- Woolf’s “Leaning Tower”
- The Spatial Turn
- Modernism and Metaphor
- Phenomenology, Psychoanalysis and Verticalism
- Historical Materialism, Technology and the Built Environment
- Summary

**Chapter One**

The Aesthetics of Aspiration:
Metropolitan Modernism and the Vertical Turn

- Apollinaire’s Turning Towers
- Kafka and the Irony of Transcendence
- Modernism, Aviation, and *Mrs. Dalloway*
- Stephen Dedalus and the Modernization of Ascension
- Leopold Bloom’s Comic Gravity

**Chapter Two**

Metropolitan Ascendance and Catastrophe:
French Responses to the Rise of New York

- The American Secularization of Verticality
- Excursus 1: The Vertical Imperative and the Tyranny of the Skyscraper
- Excursus 2: *Manhattan Transfer*
- Le Corbusier’s Catastrophism
- The Geopolitical Turn: Lévi-Strauss
- Under the Whole World’s Sky: Sartre
- Belonging to the Future: Beauvoir
- Against Panopticisn: Certeau and the World Trade Center
Chapter Three
The Aesthetics of Suspension:
Vertical Wandering in the Post-War American Novel 115.

- The Age of Anxiety and the Burden of History
- Dangling Men: Heller and Bellow
- Historical Relief: Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*
- Pynchon and the Irony of Immanence

Chapter Four
The Vertigo of Verticality:
Alfred Hitchcock and the Displacement of Terror 147.

- French Twist
- The Metropolis and Depth Psychology
- The Centripetal and the Centrifugal
- Recognition, Displacement and the Time-Image

Afterword
On the Horizon 171.

- Immanence, Globalization and Equality
- Uneven Development and Horizontal Flow
- The Problem of a Multi-Layered Dialectic
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Introduction

In the spring of 1940, four months before her London home was bombed in the Blitz and one year before she took her life, Virginia Woolf presented an essay called “The Leaning Tower” for the Workers’ Educational Association in Brighton, England. Here, Woolf attempted to conceptualize the established tradition of literary education as an “ivory tower” of privilege, prestige, and capital that determined the potential success of a writer: “It is a tower of the utmost importance; it decides his angle of vision; it affects his power of communication.” According to her argument, the aristocratic tradition of British arts and letters was shaken by the Great War, and as a result, its metaphorical tower started to lean. As more left-leaning writers grew self-conscious about their “high station” and “limited vision,” they also became increasingly disturbed by the economic and cultural capital that the tower had granted them:

All those writers too are acutely tower conscious; conscious of their middle-class birth; of their expensive educations. Then when we come to the top of the tower how strange the view looks – not altogether upside down, but slanting, sidelong. That too is characteristic of the leaning-tower writers; they do not look any class straight in the face; they look either up or down, or sidelong. There is no class so settled that they can explore it unconsciously. That perhaps is why they create no characters. Then what do we feel next, raised in imagination on top of the tower? First discomfort; next self-pity for that discomfort; which pity soon turns to anger – to anger against the builder, against society, for making us uncomfortable. Those too seem to be tendencies of the leaning-tower writers.

Although Woolf describes these “leaning-tower writers” from a distance, since as a woman she was denied access to the ivory tower in the first place, she does sympathize with those among them who did end up leaning to the left:

After they read Marx and became communists or anti-fascists, they realized that the tower was founded upon injustice and tyranny; it was wrong for a small class to possess an education that other people paid for; wrong to stand upon the gold that a bourgeois father had made from his bourgeois profession….And thus, trapped by their education, pinned down by their capital they remained on top of their leaning tower, and their state of mind as we see it reflected in their poems and plays and novels is full of discord and bitterness, full of confusion and of compromise.

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3 Woolf, “The Leaning Tower,” 168
4 Woolf, “The Leaning Tower,” 169
In many ways, Woolf is referring here to a group of writers similar to those Gertrude Stein had previously deemed “the lost generation.” However, while Stein leaned to the right during the wartime period by supporting the Vichy regime in France, Woolf became increasingly public about her pro-labor and anti-fascist bent. In concluding her essay, she asks whether writers will be able to live in a new and different society once the war against fascism is over: “Must it too be a leaning-tower generation – an oblique, sidelong, self-centred, self-conscious generation – with a foot in two worlds? Or will there be no more towers and no more classes and shall we stand, without hedges between us, on the common ground?”5 In turn, her ultimate claim that “literature is common ground” to be “trespassed” by all appears very much at odds with the conventional view of modernism as an elitist institution of disengaged aesthetes making art for art’s sake. And yet the distinction between “high” and “low” is one that Woolf confronted throughout her career, as represented perhaps best by the contrast between her celebration of Samuel Johnson’s idea of “the common reader” in her essay of that name, and her essay “Am I a Snob?”, in which her answer was a definite yes.

Instead of attempting to resolve this conflict between the high and the low, as many have imagined to be the aim of postmodernism, or to dismiss it, as many have imagined to be the aim of modernism, my aim in this dissertation is to examine how it developed in relation to the rapid changes in metropolitan society at the end of the nineteenth century, and how it was put into question with the onset of World War II. As I shall show, towers, along with other figures of aspirational ascension such as airplanes, became central metaphorical tropes of metropolitan modernism from the construction of the Eiffel Tower in 1889 to the bombing of cities during World War II (an experience that Woolf also addressed in her 1940 essay “Thoughts on Peace In an Air Raid”).7 Ultimately, my argument is that this “vertical turn” represented the dominant tendency, orientation or vector of a larger spatial turn that emerged at the end of the 19th century. Although globalizing cities like London, Paris and New York opened up new spaces of discourse, culture and commerce, they also depended on many of the vertical structures and metaphors of hierarchy, stratification, and difference that were at the same time becoming established in the built environment. Following World War II, as the United States ascended to the world stage as a dominant superpower of the atomic age, these vertical structures and metaphors came under greater scrutiny, and new ideas of gravitational suspension and horizontal networks emerged as compelling alternatives. That said, although horizontal metaphors of decentralization and democratization and have evidently gained much ground in literary discourse and popular rhetoric since World War II, it should nonetheless be clear that the “leaning tower” that Woolf described has still by no means been overturned.

5 Woolf, “The Leaning Tower,” 175
6 Woolf, “The Leaning Tower,” 178
7 In Woolf, Virginia. Selected Essays (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Woolf also addresses the dangers of air war in Three Guineas and Between the Acts, although George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four is arguably the most harrowing work of British literature to represent the experience of living in a city under constant siege from above. Indeed, in his forward to Penguin’s “centennial edition” of Orwell’s novel, Thomas Pynchon claimed it as a major inspiration for Gravity’s Rainbow, which I discuss in depth in Chapter 3.
The Spatial Turn

Since Joseph Frank published his seminal essay on “The Idea of Spatial Form” in 1945, many critics and theorists have found it difficult to avoid the argument that modernist works tend to privilege space over time, or, perhaps more precisely, to privilege what might be called chronotopic spacetime. In addition to literary scholars who debated Frank’s argument directly, such as Frank Kermode, Fredric Jameson and W.J.T. Mitchell, major interdisciplinary attempts to conceptualize the larger “spatial turn” of the long twentieth-century include Richard Kern’s cultural history of the period between 1880 and 1918, The Culture of Time and Space, and David Harvey’s theory of “time-space compression” in his book The Condition of Postmodernity. As I have attempted to make sense of such differing arguments about this spatial turn, what has interested me in particular is that they include surprisingly little discussion of its directionality. And so this is what I decided to focus on in particular.

It is my contention here that trans-Atlantic metropolitan modernism generally emphasized power and freedom in terms of verticality in the first half of the twentieth century, and that after World War II, the globalizing turn to postmodernism put this overarching vertical turn into question. That is, while early twentieth-century writers, artists and thinkers were invested to a large extent in vertical figures and metaphors of aspiration, ascension and transcendence that carried over from romanticism, late twentieth-century aesthetics put much greater emphasis on metonymic links, ideological flattening, immanence and suspension. This came to be theorized to a large extent in terms of systems and networks, discourse and deconstruction, “horizontal flows” of global circulation, and perhaps above all, the leveling of distinctions between “high” and “low.”

As I hope to show, trans-Atlantic modernism emerged in large measure in response to the twentieth-century verticalization of metropolitan culture, and most broadly, involved a transition from romantic inspiration to vertical aspiration, from metonymic realism to metaphorical modernism, from romantic spiritualism to avant-garde materialism, and from Paris to New York. Alongside the development of apparently horizontal telecommunications networks like the radio and the telephone, what I am calling the verticalization of modern culture took place most visibly through the development of tall buildings, which were built to provide living and work spaces for the new inhabitants of rapidly growing cities, and airplanes, which have established increasingly transnational connections between those cities. This verticalization came into question above all with the destruction of cities during World War II and the development of the atom bomb, after which point planners

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8 Today there are even so-called “aerotropolises,” in which an airport acts as the central commercial core of city rather than a more traditional or pedestrian downtown. Cities as diverse as Seoul, Hong Kong, Beijing, Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Dubai, Memphis, Atlanta and Dallas have experienced rapid and intensive growth in aviation-intensive businesses and related enterprises, and even the development of semi-autonomous “airport cities,” in which airports are no longer simply “non-places,” as anthropologist Marc Augé has argued, but ultra-modern centers for organizing the flow of people, goods, and capital across regional and national boundaries. See Kasarda, John D. and Lindsay, Greg. Aerotropolis: The Way We’ll Live Next (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011). More literary representations of the normalization of air transportation include Walter Kirn’s 2001 novel Up in the Air, famously adapted for the screen eight years later by Jason Reitman, and Donald Barthelme’s short story, “Overnight to Many Distant Cities,” published in his collection of that name in 1983.
increasingly turned toward horizontal models of suburbanization, decentralization, and sprawl. Overall, with both the rise of modernist verticality as well as the turn to postmodern horizontality, the sense of the modern has become increasingly beholden to the forces of Americanization, secularization, and commercialization.

In his book *The Long Twentieth Century*, Giovanni Arrighi argues that the capital accumulation of the United States after the Civil War and its concomitant ascension to the world stage was due largely to its success in developing the style of industrial management known as *vertical integration*. Defined as the degree to which a firm owns and controls both its “downstream” suppliers and “upstream” buyers, vertical integration was pioneered by American developers like the steel tycoon Andrew Carnegie at the end of the nineteenth century. According to Arrighi, it was to a large extent the economies of vertical integration that distinguished the globalization of the United States in the twentieth century from that of Britain in the nineteenth century:

In particular, the vertical integration of processes of production and exchange – which became the single most important feature of the US regime of accumulation – played no role in the formation and expansion of nineteenth-century British regime. On the contrary, the main thrust of the regime was through vertical fission rather than integration of the sequential sub-processes of production and exchange that linked primary production to final consumption.\(^9\)

In turn, according to Arrighi, it was during this period that, “even before the empire was dismantled, the collapse of the British pound’s gold standard in 1931 marked the terminal crisis of British rule over the world’s money.”\(^{10}\)

Of course it was also during this period of American capital accumulation that the United States underwent its most rapid period of urban centralization, from New York, Philadelphia and Boston to Chicago, San Francisco and Los Angeles. By contrast, after World War II, American society become increasingly decentralized, both in terms of its urban conglomerations as well as in terms of what Scott Lash and John Urry have called the shift from “organized” to “disorganized capitalism.”\(^{11}\) With the rise of post-industrial service economies based on flexible accumulation, corporations began shifting to more transnational methods of horizontal integration and outsourcing, and urban planners turned toward more horizontal models of dispersal and decentralization. As middle-class white Americans increasingly moved into newly-built suburban communities after the war, especially as a result of the GI Bill, which provided affordable housing for veterans, the so-called “inner city” came to regarded with racist and classist suspicion, and urban conglomerations like Los Angeles and Houston grew increasingly populated, sprawling and segregated.

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\(^{10}\) Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*, 179.

The history of the film industry provides an especially good example of the shift from vertical to horizontal integration, as it first emerged at the end of the nineteenth century with companies like Edison, which made film equipment as well as films themselves in New Jersey, and then exploded with the rise of other vertically-integrated companies like Pathé in Paris, UFA in Berlin, and the classical studio system of Hollywood’s “Golden Age.” From the coming of talking pictures at the end of the 1920s until the end of the 1940s, the same “Big Five” Hollywood companies (Paramount, MGM, 20th Century Fox, Warner Brothers, and RKO) controlled every aspect of the technology, production, distribution, and exhibition of their films. This all changed after 1948, however, when the Supreme Court settled the Paramount case by calling for the divestiture of the studio system according to federal antitrust law. During this postwar period of decentralization, more horizontally-integrated film companies like Universal, Columbia and United Artists expanded their already-established bases, new independent film studios began to emerge outside the classical Hollywood system, and the television industry began to bring audiovisual entertainment — and advertising — into the domestic spaces of new and rapidly expanding suburbs. Thus, by the time that Alfred Hitchcock’s Vertigo was released by Paramount in 1958, the studio system was officially over, and new horizontal networks of management and control had already become well established.

Modernism and Metaphor

Space is often contrasted with place, and in the introduction to his pioneering book on human geography, Yi-Fu Tuan offers the following distinction between them in terms of lived experience as well as metaphorical association: “Place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other.” From here he goes on to claim:

Spaciousness is closely associated with the sense of being free. Freedom implies space; it means having the power and enough room in which to act. Being free has several levels of meaning. Fundamental is the ability to transcend the present condition, and this transcendence is most simply manifest as the elementary power to move. In the act of moving, space and its attributes are directly experienced.

Thus when we talk about space, according to this common sense understanding, we are often implying something about freedom, action, transcendence, mobility, possibility, potentiality, and so on. In more political terms, references to personal space, gendered space, ethnic space, or spaces of resistance suggest the potential for independence or empowerment in the face of social control or domination; when people say they “need space,” whether they mean metaphorical “space to think” or “breathe” or actual physical


13 Yi-Fu Tuan, Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 52
distance, they are generally expressing a desire for some form of autonomy. Thus, for instance, when Virginia Woolf developed her famous feminist argument for “a room of one’s own,” she was referring both to material circumstances of financial and domestic independence as well as more metaphorical ideas of freedom and autonomy.

The importance of metaphor is key for much of my argument about the vicissitudes of verticalism over the course of the long twentieth century. Since Roman Jakobson first formulated his influential structuralist theory of realism – which suggested that the realist forms of narrative representation that developed in modern European fiction were structured mainly around metonymic relations of sequential combination and contiguity – literary critics like David Lodge have come to consider the largely syntagmatic plots of realist fiction in terms of “metonymic realism.” While this argument is somewhat reductionist, and cannot account for what Robert Alter has called the “realism of metaphor” in the works of nineteenth-century writers like Dickens, it does help illuminate the ways in which non-realist or anti-realist techniques often defied the logic of metonymic contiguity by emphasizing metaphorical similarity instead. In turn, it makes it tempting to chart an overarching formal and historical turn from the so-called “metonymic realism” of the nineteenth century to the more metaphorical modernism of the twentieth century (and then back again to postmodern metonymy, as Ihab Hassan has suggested in his various writings on the topic). However, instead of pushing this argument for metaphorical modernism to such a limit, I want to consider modernism itself as a metaphor. That is to say, I want to suggest that the idea of modernism may come into greater relief if we recognize it as an associational term of the historical imagination rather than a referential term of definitive identification. Implying “just now” or “recently fashioned,” the idea of the “modern” appears to be based less on the syntagmatic combination of existing forms than the paradigmatic substitution of old forms for new ones. In this sense I think there is some reason to consider the inter-related and often confused ideas of modernism, modernity, and modernization in terms of spatial metaphors of vertical mobility, ascension, and transcendence above all.

One particular reason for the significance of vertical metaphors for many twentieth-century writers and artists is the pervasive influence of Freudian psychoanalysis, not only with regard to the concept of the phallus, but also to theories of free association and symbolism (which were also influenced by the equally influential philosophies of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, as I discuss in my first chapter). For instance, as Linda Williams has argued in her study of surrealist cinema Figures of Desire, the Surrealists generally avoided metonymic structures of contiguity and depended instead on metaphorical and...

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symbolic relations (and, we might add, forms of montage based on dissimilarity) in order to develop works of art that would resemble the kind of dream-work that Freud theorized. Similarly, and more broadly, many modernist and avant-garde works involved both a literal, spatial orientation toward vertical height and depth as well as a metaphorical turn to relations of similarity and paradigmatic substitution, which may also be described as a form of verticalization. Indeed, at least according to Jacques Lacan’s theoretical attempt to bring together Jakobson’s structural linguistics and Freudian psychoanalysis, desire and displacement may be conceptualized as being structured metonymically along a horizontal axis, whereas substitution and condensation are metaphorical processes corresponding to a vertical axis. That is, while metonymic chains of desire are made of horizontal relations through which signifiers are linked according to contiguity or combination, metaphorical substitutions are constituted as vertical relations in which a signifier in one signifying chain may be replaced or exchanged through its apparent similarity with a signifier in another chain.18

Lacan’s system remains to a large extent beholden to binary terms, and thus for a post-structuralist (let alone a non-Lacanian) it may also appear somewhat reductionist. In the following chapters I will be agreeing to a large extent with Jacques Derrida’s attempt to get beyond such binary systems, as well as Theodor Adorno’s rejection of the opposition between “immanent critique” and “transcendental critique,”19 and so I will cite Lacan’s system here mainly as a provisional tool for provoking further analysis:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Horizontality</th>
<th>Verticality</th>
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<tr>
<td>Metonymy</td>
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<td>Contiguity</td>
<td>Similarity</td>
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<td>Displacement</td>
<td>Condensation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Misrecognition</td>
<td>Identification</td>
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In the following chapters I will consider the extent to which this system is helpful in understanding many of the works that have come to define modernism and the avant-garde,

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19 For Adorno’s critique of these terms according to the theory of negative dialectics, see especially his essay “Cultural Criticism and Society” in Prisms (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983). As I shall discuss in my first chapter, such major Germanic transcendentalists as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Marx and Freud depended to a large extent on vertical metaphors in order to develop their theories. My argument in later chapters is that their influence waned somewhat after World War II as so-called “immanent” critiques were developed by French theorists like Lefebvre, Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, and Bourdieu (not to mention their Anglophone followers and interlocutors). For a fascinating intellectual history of how this movement was adopted in American discourse, see François Cisset’s French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998). Major exceptions of course abound, from the immanent critiques of Bergson, Wittgenstein and Russell to the transcendental critiques of Levinas, Ricoeur, and Badiou; from the structuralism of Durkheim, Saussure and Lévi-Strauss to the critical theory of Benjamin, Horkheimer and Adorno.
while at the same time I will contend that the opposition between the horizontal and the vertical is in fact largely an unstable construction of human cultural experience.

This instability is especially apparent when considering the changing meaning of the term “vertigo” (from the Latin *vertere*, to turn), which has itself been turned over the course of the twentieth century to stand more for the vertiginous “fear of heights” than mere spinning or panoramic dizziness, which it had mainly signified at least since the Renaissance. In nineteenth-century novelistic representations of modern life, the spatial sense of vertiginous spinning was often referred to in order to represent the dizzying experience of the modern city. In Balzac’s *Lost Illusions*, for instance, we read that “Lucien was stunned by the whirl of Paris” [*Lucien fut étourdi de la rapidité du tournoiement parisiens*], and in a famous line from his *Théorie de la demarche*, Balzac actually defined his writing practice in general in relation to “le vertige.” For Balzac, both “le vertige” and “la toise” were necessary extremes or “asymptotes” for the creative imagination to thrive, the latter term referring literally to a rod for measuring vertical height also known as a “six pieds,” and more metaphorically to the act of judgment, estimation or evaluation involved in looking someone up and down. In Balzac’s words, “Je serai toujours entre la toise du savant et le vertige du fou,” or, loosely, “I will always remain between the yardstick of the sage and the vertigo of the madman.”

Louis Aragon embraced a similar idea of metropolitan dizziness in his avant-garde city novel *Paris Peasant* [*Le paysan de Paris*], published in 1926. Here, “le vertige” appears as a pivotal concept for both surrealism and modernity in general. The word first appears when the narrator tells us: “I announce to the world this momentous news item: a new vice has just been born, man has acquired one more source of vertigo – Surrealism, offspring of frenzy and darkness” [*J’annonce au monde ce fait divers de première grandeur: un nouveau vice vient de naître, un vertige de plus est donné à l’homme le Surréalisme, fils de la frénésie et de l’ombre*]. It then appears again later on when the narrator concludes, while strolling through the Buttes-Chaumont park: “Lucidity came to me when I at last succumbed to the vertigo of the modern” [*La clarté me vint enfin que j’avais le vertige du moderne*]. As Aragon’s narrator goes on to explain, it is this vertigo of the modern that has produced the problems of distraction and inattention that have become especially prevalent in metropolitan life:

21 The passage reads in full: “Un fou est un homme qui voit un abîme et y tombe. Le savant l’entend tomber, prend sa toise, mesure la distance, fait un escalier, descend, remote, et se frotte les mains, après avoir dit à l’univers: “Cet abîme a dix-huit cent deux pieds de profondeur, la température du fond est de deux degrés plus chaude que celle de notre atmosphère.

Puis il vit en famille. Le fou reste dans sa loge. Ils meurent tous deux. Dieu seul sait, qui du fou, qui du savant, a été le plus près du vrai. Empédocle est le premier savant qui ait cumulé. Il n’y a pas un seul de nos mouvements, ni une seule de nos actions qui ne soit un abîme, où l’homme le plus sage ne puisse laisser sa raison, et qui ne puisse fournir au savant l’occasion de prendre la toise et d’essayer à mesurer l’infini. Il y a de l’infini dans le moindre gramen.

Ici, je serai toujours entre la toise du savant et le vertige du fou. Je dois en prévenir loyalement celui qui veut me lire; il faut de l’intrépidité pour rester entre ces deux asymptotes. Cette théorie ne pouvait être faite que par un homme assez osé pour côtoyer la folie sans crainte et la science sans peur. [italics mine].

...let us pause a moment, like a man holding back from the edge of the place’s depths, attracted equally by the current of objects and the whirlpools of his own being, let us pause in this strange zone where all is distraction, distraction of attention as well as of inattention, so as to experience this vertigo. The double illusion which holds us here is confronted with our desire for absolute knowledge. 24

As I hope to show in the following chapters, this metaphorical “vertigo” of metropolitan experience turned increasingly from the horizontal to the vertical as a result of the growing Americanization, commercialization, and secularization of modernity over the course of the long twentieth century. For instance, when Louis-Ferdinand Céline attempted to describe what it was like to gaze up at the skyscrapers in New York, he called it a “reverse vertigo,” and by the time Hitchcock’s famous film Vertigo came out in 1958, the term had evidently come to stand for the fear of heights above all.

Phenomenology, Psychoanalysis and Verticalism

The new modernist consciousness of verticality, which was produced to a large extent by new technologies, economic forces, and urban environments, evidently had both phenomenological and psychological implications. For this reason, I have found it helpful to supplement Jakobson’s structuralist theory of metaphor and metonymy with the more phenomenological theory of embodied language and spatial metaphor developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their widely influential book Metaphors We Live By. 25 Here, Lakoff and Johnson argue not only that all language is necessarily metaphorical, but that spatial metaphors are especially prevalent because of the phenomenological lived experience of the human body. In most basic terms, according to their argument, the reason we say that we feel “up” when we are happy and “down” when we are unhappy or “depressed” is that our corporal experience as vertically erect creatures has led us as a species to associate standing upright with awareness or vitality, and lying down with rest or death.

This more phenomenological approach is by no means incompatible with either psychoanalytic or post-structuralist theory. In fact, Freud himself referred to the experience of vertical posture to explain why humankind has tended to privilege visual perception and experience while associating the olfactory with the animal. In a long and curious footnote to his 1929 book Civilization and Its Discontents, Freud writes:

The diminution of the olfactory stimuli seems itself to be a consequence of man’s raising himself from the ground, of his assumption of an upright gait; this made his genitals, which were previously concealed, visible and in need of protection, and so provoked feelings of shame in him. 26

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24 Aragon, Paris Peasant, 44 (emphasis mine).
Derrida has also considered this theory of the verticality of the human, and in referring to Freud’s footnote directly in his essay on Kafka’s “Before the Law,” he speculates further:

The scheme of elevation, the upward movement, everything that is marked by the prefix super (über) is here as decisive as the schema of purification, of the turning away from impurity, from the zones of the body that are malodorous and must not be touched. The turning away is an upward movement. The high (and therefore the great) and the pure, are what repression produces as origin of morality, they are what is better absolutely, they are the origin of value and of the judgment of value.²⁷

Along remarkably similar lines, Yi-Fu Tuan has discussed the development of vertical posture in childhood in order to develop his theory that spatial values result from embodied experience developed since infancy. Citing the psychologists Arnold Gesell and Catherine Amatruda,²⁸ he writes:

Upright and prone: these positions yield two contrary worlds. When a six-month-old infant sits up, Gesell and Amatrud report, “his eyes widen, pulse strengthens, breathing quickens and he smiles.” For the infant the move from the supine horizontal to the seated perpendicular is already “more than a personal triumph. It is a widening horizon, a new social orientation.” This postural triumph and the consequent widening of horizon are repeated daily throughout a person’s life. Each day we defy gravity and other natural forces to create and sustain an orderly human world; at night we give in to these forces and take leave of the world we have created. The standing posture is assertive, solemn, and aloof. The prone position is submissive, signifying the acceptance of our biological condition.²⁹

Finally, Jean-Luc Nancy has taken some of these ideas even further by discussing the spatial metaphorics of thinking itself in his essay “The Gravity of Thought” [Le poids d’une pensée].³⁰ Here, Nancy begins with the etymology of the word “to think” in French, penser, which, just like the English word ponder or the Spanish pensar, derives from the Latin pensare, meaning to weigh, measure, or evaluate. While admitting not to be able to explain entirely why this is the case, Nancy opens up space for analytical speculation about the materiality or immateriality of thoughts through his own philosophical free associations:

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²⁹ Tuan, Yi-Fu. Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 37
Who could say what is proper to thinking [pensée] and to weighing [pesée], to thinking as much as weighing, thus being properly neither? Who can think how one counterbalances the other [se font pendant], or at what inclination [pente] one slides into the other? And why should weighing,” as a material act or state, be the proper and primary degree from which or on which “thought,” as the second degree, as an immaterial act of state, would depend – a dependency that itself would entail some loss of expenditure [dépense] or meaning in the passage from one word to another? Who could weigh, and on what scales, the “materiality” of weighing, on the one hand, and the “immateriality” of thought on the other? On what unit of weight, on what law of gravity [pesanteur], would such an operation be based?

For Nancy, although the “weight of a thought” is not itself something that can be perceived, it remains what he calls a “limit-experience” because thinking does indeed take place through lived experience of weighing, measuring, or evaluating the world external to it. This is why he associates it with finitude, and argues that the “weight of a localized body is the true purely sensible a priori condition of the activity of reason: a transcendental aesthetics of gravity [pesanteur].” In this way, we may read his argument along with that of Lakoff and Johnson as suggesting that, just as thought depends on metaphorical language, metaphors are largely dependent on the phenomenological experience of the body in the material world.

But what do all these questions of phenomenology and psychoanalysis have to do with the literary or aesthetic imagination? This is the question that Gaston Bachelard attempted to answer in the theory of vertical poetics that he developed under the title Air and Dreams [L’air et les songes]. Focusing on the romantic poetry of Percy Shelley and the “ascensional psyche” of Friedrich Nietzsche, among others, Bachelard attempted to show just how much the aesthetic imagination has been oriented toward dreams of flight, ascension and transcendence. Bachelard’s study of the “vertical imagination” is not his best-known work, but perhaps even lesser known is the existential phenomenology of aesthetic verticality that the Swiss psychoanalyst Ludwig Binswanger developed over a decade earlier. First published in German in 1930, Binswanger’s essay “Dream and Existence” was eventually translated into French after the war by Michel Foucault, who also commented on it in one of his first publications from the 1950s. According to Binswanger, dreams of aesthetic aspiration are generally represented in spatial terms as a drive for vertical self-transcendence, from commonplace dreams of flight and mountaineering to Ibsen’s 1882 play The Master Builder.  

Just as Icarus ends up plummeting to his death as a result of flying too high, and the proverbial over-ambitious mountain-climber gets stuck on a precipice from which he cannot get down, Ibsen’s play revolves around an architect who is driven to complete the tallest tower ever built, and then ultimately falls from its top after developing a newfound vertigo that he cannot overcome. As a pathological condition, Binswanger defined this excessive aesthetic attitude as “Verstiegenheit,” which Jacob Needleman has rendered in English as “extravagance.” Yet what is lost in this otherwise helpful translation the vertical metaphor of the German word, which is related to steigen (“to climb”) and versteigen (“to dare”), and thus literally means both over-reaching or over-stepping one’s bounds, if not

31 Binswanger, Ludwig. Henrik Ibsen und das Problem der Selbstrealisation in der Kunst (Heidelberg, 1949)
even “flying off the rocker,” according to Binswanger’s diagnostic emphasis on instability and megalomania, As I hope to show, the questions of desire, transcendence, and hubris that are stake in this psychological disposition are exemplified by the modernist fascination with the technology of flight and the architecture of towers, from the tragic myths of Daedalus and Icarus and the Tower of Babel to the modern development of the Eiffel Tower, the American skyscraper, and the airplane.

Before either Binswanger or Bachelard developed their phenomenological theories of the vertical imagination, the first explicit case for Verticalism as an aesthetic movement had already been propounded by the poet, editor and translator Eugene Jolas (whose wife and collaborator, Maria Jolas, was in fact the translator of Bachelard’s most famous book, The Poetics of Space). Having first begun developing his ideas of Verticalism in occasional poems, articles and journal entries throughout the 1920s, Jolas was at the forefront of the verse manifesto “Poetry is Vertical,” which was printed in the March 1932 issue of transition, the journal he helped to found in Paris four years earlier. Samuel Beckett, Carl Einstein, Hans Arp, and several others joined Jolas in signing the manifesto, which in many ways followed from the now more famous transition manifesto of 1929, entitled “Revolution of the Word,” which was signed by Jolas as well as Kay Boyle, Hart Crane, Harry Crosby and Stuart Gilbert, among others. Beginning with an epigraph from the poet Léon Paul Fargue – “On a été trop horizontal, j’ai envie d’être vertical” – the verticalist manifesto concluded with an argument for relational communication as an affective, linguistic process of upward mobility: “Poetry builds a nexus between the ‘I’ and the ‘you’ by leading the emotions of the sunken, telluric depths upward toward the illumination of a collective reality and a totalistic universe.” That same year, in his essay “The Language of the Night,” Jolas further proclaimed: “The period of cynicism and disillusion is over. We are entering upon an era which should adopt again a vertical attitude toward life.” After expanding on his theory of Verticalism in his poetry chapbook Planets and Angels, published in 1940, Jolas ultimately devoted an entire book to the movement, which he published the next year under the title Vertical: A Handbook for Romantic-Mystical Ascensions. Like the contents of transition, this edited collection was made up of writers as well as visual artists who have since come to be regarded as the most prominent representatives of modernism and the avant-garde. However, while these terms were never adopted by the journal itself, and Verticalism has since been largely forgotten, it was arguably this latter idea above all that circulated among the many international writers and artists who became associated with transition during its influential inter-war years.

Historical Materialism, Technology and the Built Environment

While Jolas attempted to rekindle the mysticism of what he called “white romanticism,” my project here adopts a somewhat more historical materialist approach to questions of transcendence. Thus in many ways it is more in agreement with the critique of “top-down” doctrines of philosophical reason that Marx and Engels developed in The
German Ideology, where they declared: “In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven.”

However, while many of the most prominent Marxist critics of modernism remain fixed on nineteenth-century Paris, including T.J. Clark, Marshall Berman and David Harvey, my study attempts to account for the rise of New York in influencing the course of twentieth-century ideas of modernity. In turn, while I’ve been influenced by Fredric Jameson’s formidable theory of postmodernism as the “cultural logic of late capitalism,” as well as important studies by Ihab Hassan, Brian McHale, Linda Hutcheon, and Morris Dickstein, among others, my argument highlights the significance of World War II for many of the writers who are now considered some of postmodernism’s greatest representatives. In turn, with regard to more recent scholarship, my project shares some common ground with attempts to rethink modernist culture in terms of sensation, media, and technology, including Sara Danius’s study of “the senses of modernism,” Michael North’s book on modernism and photographic technology, and Mark Goble’s study of modernist mediation, among others. At the same time, however, I am trying to push ideas of media ecology further by trying to address the lived experience of the built environment. In this way, I have come to appreciate the work of Sharon Marcus and David Pike on urban space in nineteenth-century Paris and London, David Henkin’s history of reading in the public urban spaces of nineteenth-century New York, Robert Alter’s book on urban experience and the novel, Michael Rubenstein’s study of infrastructure in Irish modernism and postcolonialism, Anthony Vidler’s work on the psychological experience of architecture and urban space, and Edward Dimendberg’s book on the relationship between American film noir and urbanization. Unlike each of these studies, however, my comparative approach emphasizes the transnational and especially trans-Atlantic emergence of modernist discourse in the built environment of globalizing cities like Paris, London and New York. By highlighting the work of a range of writers in my first two chapters, including Apollinaire, Kafka, Dos Passos, Joyce and Céline, I have attempted to pay particular attention both to the transnational dynamics of metropolitan modernism as well as the effects of the two

32 Marx, Karl and Engels, Friedrich. The German Ideology (TK)
40 See especially Vidler, Anthony. “Bodies in Space/Subjects in the City” in The Blackwell City Reader (London: Blackwell, 2002) and “Photourbanism: Planning the City from Above and from Below” in Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson, eds. A Companion to the City (London: Blackwell, 2007) and
41 Dimendberg, Edward. Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity (Harvard University Press, 2004)
World Wars on the vicissitudes of twentieth-century verticalism. In turn, by focusing in the my later chapters on the theories of Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt and T.W. Adorno, the classic postwar novels of Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, and Thomas Pynchon, and the postwar films of Alfred Hitchcock, I have attempted to emphasize the role of World War II in effecting the transition from modernist aspiration, transcendence, and verticality to postmodernist suspension, oscillation, and horizontality.

Summary

Broadly, the first part of this project discusses the rise of modernist verticality in European and American literature, urban space, and aesthetics, and the second part focuses on the critical suspicion of vertical transcendence in transnational American fiction, film and theory that responded to World War II, and the afterward discusses how this history helps us better understand the more horizontalist rhetoric of globalization and new media that has become prevalent since then. In what follows I shall describe the overall organization and contents in more detail.

The first chapter, entitled “The Aesthetics of Aspiration,” demonstrates my underlying argument about the rise of verticalist poetics in early twentieth-century metropolitan literature. After a general introduction surveying ideas of modernist aspiration, ascension and transcendence, I examine the controversy surrounding the construction of the Eiffel Tower as a “monstrous tower of Babel” before turning to a close reading of Guillaume Apollinaire’s 1913 poem “Zone” as a landmark ode to the verticalization of modern life. In particular, I analyze the poem’s representation of the lyric imagination as an aspiration toward ascension in relation to its figuration of the Eiffel Tower as a pastoral “shepherdess” and the aviator as a neo-Christian symbol of salvation. I then contrast Apollinaire’s avant-garde celebration of twentieth-century modernity with his later visual poem “2ième cannonier conducteur,” in which the Eiffel Tower no longer stands for cosmopolitan peace, but rather French patriotism during World War I. From here, I turn to Franz Kafka’s critique of Apollinaire before focusing on what I call Kafka’s “irony of transcendence” through close readings of his Tower of Babel parables, his representation of urban space and the body, and his philosophical reflections on Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. I turn next to show how many of these same questions about the aesthetic “modernization of ascension” emerge in James Joyce’s Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Focusing on tensions between the classical and the modern and Christian and the non-Christian, I also compare the vertical aspirations of Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus to the cyclical wandering in Ulysses, where we find the figure of Leopold Bloom appearing as an alternative father-figure who signifies the potential for levity and error without the dangers of Icarian catastrophe. Here I show how Stephen’s aesthetic hubris, which he develops in contrast to his schooling in religious ascension, gradually gives way to a more humble appreciation of contingency and difference through his relationship to Bloom. In conclude by arguing that just as Joyce turned to Vico’s philosophy of cyclical history as an apparent alternative to Nietzsche’s philosophy of power and levity, much of modernist culture came to imagine aesthetic practice as a struggle between revolutionary movement and vertical transcendence.
Following from this analysis of aspirational aesthetics in early twentieth-century European culture, my second chapter, “Metropolitan Ascendance and Catastrophe,” considers the vertical turn of American urbanization and architecture by considering the travel writings of French critics who recognized New York as an emerging rival to Paris. In particular, I focus on the ways in which these writers critiqued the rise of New York City as symbolic of the secularization, commercialization, and Americanization of metropolitan modernity. I begin first with a history of the American verticalization of urban architecture, with particular attention to Louis Sullivan’s essay “The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered,” Frank Lloyd Wright’s more critical lecture “The Tyranny of the Skyscraper,” and John Dos Passos’s novel Manhattan Transfer. While accounting for the travels of American modernists in Paris, I ultimately focus on the much less recognized French turn to New York. Discussing key essays by Paul Morand, Fernand Léger, Le Corbusier, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir, I show how each of these French travelers came to see the verticality of New York as symbolic of the Americanization of modernity. I bring the chapter to a close by examining Michel de Certeau’s 1974 essay “Walking in the City,” which opens with a reflection on the World Trade Center in order to develop its challenging critiques of panoptic verticality and everyday practice.

In contrast to the discourse of ascension defined above, my third chapter on “The Aesthetics of Suspension” focuses on the emergent suspicion of transcendence and the increasing concern for immanence, oscillation and indeterminacy in American novels written in the aftermath of World War II. Here I begin with Jolas’ epitaph to the movement he called Verticalism in his 1949 essay “Pan-Romanticism in the Atomic Age” before turning to my central discussion of “vertical wandering” in five major post-World War II American novels. Specifically, I focus on the characterizations of Joseph, the prospective draftee in Saul Bellow’s first novel Dangling Man; Yossarian, the absurdly stuck soldier in Joseph Heller’s Catch-22; Billy Pilgrim, who becomes fantastically “unstuck in time” after surviving the bombing of Dresden in Kurt Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse-Five; and Benny Profane, whose description as a “human yo-yo” in Thomas Pynchon’s V. recalls Yossarian’s nickname “Yo-Yo” in Heller’s novel. Focusing on Pynchon’s trope of the “yo-yo” in particular, I show how it returns in the form of the missile-producing aeronautics company Yoyodyne in Gravity’s Rainbow. I conclude my chapter by discussing how this major novel manipulates modernist spatial forms in order to critique the incorporation of the Nazi military-industrial complex into American society after World War II.

While the previous chapter examined five exemplary American novels that respond to World War II directly, my fourth and final chapter, “The Vertigo of Verticality,” focuses on the ways in which this history is registered more indirectly in one of the most iconic and haunting films in cinema history: Alfred Hitchcock’s Vertigo (1958). In order to argue that the idea of “vertigo” was reoriented from the horizontal to the vertical in response to World War II trauma and Cold War terror, I show how Hitchcock’s emphasis on urban acrophobia derives from the wartime French novel on which his film was based as well as his 1949 essay “The Enjoyment of Fear,” in which he defines his career-long interest in terror and suspense in relation to the Blitzkrieg in London. In turn, I show how Hitchcock considered the dangers of air war further in The Birds, which was based on a story by Daphne du Maurier about a World War II veteran living on the coast of England. Focusing above all on spatial representations of fear and anxiety, I not only show how Hitchcock represents Freudian
depth psychology in relation to the vertical topography of the San Francisco Bay Area, but also how he touches on the contemporary urban theory of Frank Lloyd Wright, whom he attempted to hire for his next film, *North By Northwest*. Wright had already been questioning the American obsession with verticality for decades, and in his last book *The Living City*, published the same year that *Vertigo* came out, he expanded his critique of what he called “the vertigo of verticality” in order to account for the destruction of European cities during World War II as well as new Cold War fears of nuclear attack. In conclusion, I consider the importance of World War II for Gilles Deleuze’s theory of twentieth-century cinema, and compare his understanding of Hitchcock to that of the contemporary filmmaker Chris Marker, whose film *La Jetée* refers directly to *Vertigo* in order to tell its own story of traumatic memory and wartime destruction.

My Afterword, “On the Horizon,” ends the project with a more theoretical consideration of horizontality in the more contemporary discourse of the global present, from Deleuze’s discussions of deterritorialization and immanence and arguments for “horizontal flow” in the work of transnational theorists like Saskia Sassen and Arjun Appadurai to the more populist claims of Thomas Friedman in his best-selling book *The World is Flat*. While recognizing that the rise of non-contiguous telecommunications networks (radio, telephone, television and internet) have produced new possibilities for mobility, simultaneity, circulation and publicity, I caution against idealizations of democratic horizontalization that overlook the persistence of inequality, and what could be considered the multiple “layers” or “stories” of history, which have traditionally been figured in vertical terms. My implicit aim here is to critique the reactionary resurgence of triumphalist verticalism, as exemplified by the post-9/11 American turn to imperial aggression as a melancholic response to the reorientation of “ground zero” from Hiroshima to New York. In the end, my argument is that neither modernist verticalism nor postmodernist horizontalism is sufficient for grappling with problems of global inequality and difference that remain clear and present today.
Chapter One
THE AESTHETICS OF ASPIRATION:
Metropolitan Modernism and the Vertical Turn

Although many critics have attempted to establish clear boundaries between modernism and the avant-garde,\(^\text{42}\) we may nonetheless discern among many of the trans-Atlantic artists and writers marked by these labels a certain shared orientation, tendency, sensibility, or inclination, which I will describe here as an *aesthetics of aspiration*. Attempting to rise above nineteenth-century appeals to romantic inspiration and realistic representation, many of the figures who came to define the aesthetic innovations of the early twentieth century asserted art itself as a source of modern meaning and progress. While numerous works of this period revolved around cyclical figures of revolutionary mobility, or involved cut-up forms of Cubist fragmentation and cinematic montage, the aesthetics of aspiration turned above all to vertical figures of height, flight, ascension and transcendence. And with varying degrees of social engagement or reserve, self-expression or self-denial, the ideological grounds for this vertical turn ranged across the political spectrum from peaceful, cosmopolitan progressivism to aggressive, nationalist hubris.

From the age of Homer to the nineteenth century of Melville and Conrad,\(^\text{43}\) the sea remained a primary site of epic, poetic and novelistic fantasy. With new technological developments in aviation and architecture, however, experiences of modernity turned increasingly upward, and the imaginations of writers confronting the rise of the twentieth century were driven into the air. A great number of literary examples from various contexts could be mentioned here, including the fascination with vertical architecture in Yeats’ late collection *The Tower*, John Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer*, and Apollinaire’s Parisian poems, and with airplanes in F.T. Marinetti’s “The Futurist Manifesto,” Vicente Huidobro’s

\(^{42}\) The analytical opposition between these two terms has been argued assiduously by Peter Bürger, Matei Calinescu and Andreas Huyssen, who generally claim (with particular emphasis on Continental Europe) that the avant-garde worked to connect art and everyday life for the sake of social engagement, whereas modernism opened up a distance between the two for the sake of aesthetic distinction. See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant Garde* (University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987); Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1986). This holds true in many cases, but as I discuss here, there are also many counter-examples. For instance, the international literary journal *Transition* (1927-1938) was a particularly important forum for bringing together artists who would only later be separated according to these rigid categories; its pages included such diverse names as Apollinaire and Kafka, Joyce and Hemingway, Bataille and Mann, Breton and Stein. Another major counter-example to the “great divide” thesis is John Dos Passos, who managed to reach a wide, popular readership while remaining committed to both socialist politics and formal experimentation. Although typically recognized as a major modernist writer, Dos Passos did not respect the opposition between art and everyday life. Alfred Döblin may be the best example of an early twentieth-century European novelist who similarly resisted the opposition between “high” and “low” culture that has appealed to so many other artists and critics. Of course James Joyce’s *Ulysses* was a pioneering model for both writers, although it has remained much more elusive to the so-called “common reader.”

\(^{43}\) See Margaret Cohen’s *The Novel and the Sea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010) for an extended argument about literature in the age of “maritime modernity.”
“Altazor,” Franz Kafka’s “The Airplanes at Brescia,” Bertolt Brecht’s “The Flight of Lindbergh,” and Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway, among many others. More metaphorical pontifications on spatial form are also important for such post-Nietzschean day-dreamers or Luftmenschen as James Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, Thomas Mann’s Hans Castorp, and Wyndham Lewis’s Tarr. Oscillating between aesthetic ambition and narcissistic hubris, and apparently exhausted by the nineteenth-century obsession with figures like Prometheus and Faust, many of these writers found new significance in such ancient archetypes of ascension and downfall as Icarus and Daedalus, Lucifer and Christ, and the Tower of Babel. And as I discuss in my next chapter, the fascination with towers and height was also apparent in popular cinema, from early actuality films depicting the Eiffel Tower (Edison Manufacturing Co., 1900) to such features as Paris qui dort (René Clair, 1925), Metropolis (Fritz Lang, 1927), The Crowd (King Vidor, 1928), and, of course, King Kong (Merien C. Cooper and Ernest B. Shoedsack, 1933).

As we shall see, the greatest advocate for Verticalism in trans-Atlantic modernist and avant-garde aesthetics was Eugene Jolas, the multilingual poet, editor and translator who founded the international literary journal transition (and who ultimately called his unfinished memoir The Man From Babel). The greatest critic of verticality during this period was arguably Georges Bataille. Yet despite the fact that Bataille has come to be read as a radical proponent of the horizontal, acephalous, and formless, he was also deeply invested in the aesthetics of aspiration, and was in fact first translated into English for publication in Jolas’s 1941 anthology Vertical: A Yearbook For Romantic-Mystical Ascension. While Bataille did indeed oppose both liberal-humanist and fascist assertions of ascension, he was also a great defender of Nietzsche, and his wartime essay “Summit and Decline” leaves little doubt about his devotion to Zarathustra’s call for vertical self-transcendence.

44 For more on this figure, see my discussion of Kafka and Joyce later in this chapter as well as my chapter “Vertical Wandering.”


46 See especially Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, Yves-Alain Bois and Martin Jay for readings of Bataille as an anti-verticalist. One particularly important example of Bataille’s theory of vertical embodiment is his 1929 essay “The Big Toe,” in which he writes: “Although within the body blood flows in equal quantities from high to low and from low to high, there is a bias in favor of that which elevates itself, and human life is erroneously seen as an elevation. The division of the universe into subterranean hell and perfectly pure heaven is an indelible conception, mud and darkness being the principles of evil, as light and celestial space are the principles of good: with their feet in mud but their heads more or less in light, men obstinately imagine a tide that will permanently elevate them, never to return, into pure space. Human life entails, in fact, the range of seeing oneself as a back and forth movement from refuse to the ideal, and from the ideal to refuse – a rage that is easily directed against an organ as base as the foot.” Bataille, Georges. Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).


thinker to defend Nietzsche during this period was Gaston Bachelard: in 1943, two years before the publication of Bataille’s study On Nietzsche, Bachelard devoted an important chapter to the “air philosopher” of the “ascensional psyche” in his book Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement.49

Over a decade earlier, though perhaps lesser known in his day, the Swiss psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger also developed a psychoanalytic-phenomenological theory of the vertical imagination. While Bachelard may not have been aware of Binswanger, Michel Foucault read him closely during his early research into psychiatry and madness, and focused on Binswanger’s study of “Dreams and Existence” in one of the first essays he published in the early 1950s.50 Beginning with a conception of artistic aspiration as a desire for vertical self-transcendence, which Paul de Man has interpreted in terms of “the sublimation of the self,” Binswanger’s philosophy culminated to a large extent in his theoretical critique of Verstiegenheit. This excessive psychological orientation may be defined as “extravagance,” as Jacob Needleman renders it in English, but what is lost in this translation is not only the vertical metaphor of the German word, which is related to steigen (“to climb”) and versteigen (“to presume”) and thus literally means over-reaching or over-stepping one’s bounds, but also its more diagnostic implications of pathological excessiveness, narcissism, or megalomania. “Off the deep end” or “in the clouds” are two English idioms that get closer to the everyday sense of the German word, and a more poetic rendering, as suggested by Paul de Man and Harold Bloom, is “falling upwards.”51 This image is especially appropriate in the context of Binswanger’s theory given his attempt to compare Verstiegenheit to Heidegger’s concept of Verfallen or “fallenness,” and his overall argument that this psychological disposition represents a form of missglückten Dasein or “failed being-in-the-world.” Of course we may also recognize Binswanger’s psychiatric concern for the aestheticization of madness as a critical response to the rise of National Socialism. Hitler was, after all, a failed artist, and as Walter Benjamin observed, his will to power involved an aestheticization of politics that derived from much more than the kinds of ideas dreamt up in Nietzschean philosophy.

There were of course many other nineteenth-century precursors to the twentieth-century vertical turn besides Nietzsche’s philosophy of levity and transcendence, such as the science fiction of Jules Verne and much of Romanticism, defined by Bachelard as a movement of the “vertical imagination” and by Jolas as representing the “mythos of ascension.” In one particularly suggestive essay, which remains undated but was presumably written shortly after World War II, Jolas defended his loyalty to the “white romanticism” represented by myths, fairy tales and the writings of Novalis, as opposed to the “dark

49 Bachelard, Gaston. L’air et les songes: essai sur l’imagination du mouvement (Librairie José Corti, 1943). In this war-time study, Bachelard formulated many of the same neo-romantic and mystical ideas as Jolas, but analyzed them in more academic terms of phenomenology, existentialism, and psychoanalysis. Although Jolas may never have interacted personally with Bachelard, it was Maria Jolas (née McDonald) who ultimately translated Bachelard’s famous study La poétique de l’espace into English not long after its original French publication in 1958. See Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Orion Press, 1964)


romanticism” that helped fuel the violence of twentieth-century German imperialism. “We hated the modern Germany we saw about us,” Jolas writes here, “the Germany of grotesque militarists of world expansion, and we lived mentally in the pious legendary country of 150 years before, when the great romantic Jean-Paul Richter could proudly say: ‘To England belongs the empire of the sea, to France that of the land, and to Germany that of the sky.’ In quoting this line, Jolas’ suggestion is that eighteenth-century German romanticism claimed dominion over the sky only as a metaphor for the realm of the imagination, whereas in the twentieth century it did indeed attempt to overtake its imperial rivals by actually waging war on its neighbors from the air.

Apollinaire’s Turning Towers

The first, most iconic example of the post-romantic vertical turn is no doubt the Eiffel Tower, the tallest building in the world from 1889 to 1930 and still one of the most world-renowned symbols of the modernist metropolis. It has not stood without criticism, however, and in fact even before its iron lattice design was completed, a manifesto against its construction was signed by Alexandre Dumas, Guy de Maupassant and Sully Prudhomme, among others. Opposing the tower as a monumental symbol of metropolitan hubris, they argued “against the erection, in the very heart of our capital, of the useless and monstrous...”

52 The German romantic writer Jean-Paul Richter was evidently still influential in Jolas’ time, but he appears to have fallen into relative obscurity since then, and is often overlooked as the one who first developed the expression “God is Dead.” This line from his novel Siebenkäs (1796–7) was quoted by Madame de Stael in De L’allemagne (1810) and by Nerval at the beginning of his poem “Le Christ aux Oliviers” (1844) well before it was developed by Nietzsche in Thus Spoke Zarathustra (1883–85). For more on these connections, see Libhart, Byron R. “Madame de Staël, Charles de Villers and the Death of God in Jean Paul’s Songe” in Comparative Literature Studies, Vol. 9 No. 2 (June, 1972). Bachelard also discusses Jean Paul throughout Air and Dreams, and in The Space of Literature, Maurice Blanchot refers to “the ideal of Jean-Paul Richter, whose heroes, ’lofty men,’ die in a pure desire to die, ‘their eyes gazing steadfastly beyond the clouds’ in response to the call of a dream which disembodies and dissolves them.” Blanchot, Maurice. The Space of Literature, trans. Ann Smock (University of Nebraska Press, 1982, 111).


54 According to Peter Sloterdijk’s far more bold argument in Terror from the Air (New York: Semiotext(e), 2009), the twentieth century began on April 22, 1915, when the German army used poison gas against France, thus marking the transition from classical warfare to modern terrorism: “This terror from the air inaugurated an era in which the main idea was no longer to target the enemy's body, but their environment. From then on, what would be attacked in wartime as well as in peacetime would be the very conditions necessary for life. This kind of terrorism became the matrix of modern and postmodern war, from World War I’s toxic gas to the Nazi Zyklon B used in Auschwitz, from the bombing of Dresden to the attack on the World Trade Center” (quoted from the back cover). This argument seems to bolster Samir Amin’s critique of economic determinism and what he calls the “invisible fist” of capitalism in his even more radical diatribe, Obsolescent Capitalism: Contemporary Politics and Global Disorder. Here, Amin suggests that the twentieth-century militarization of the United States has to a large extent driven its economic and hegemonic ascendance rather than the other way around.
Eiffel Tower that public malignity, often marked by good sense and a spirit of justice, has already baptized the Tower of Babel.\textsuperscript{55}

Roland Barthes obviously draws from this critique in his 1964 essay “La tour Eiffel” when he contends that the tower is an exemplary symptom of what he calls “a true Babel complex.” Central to Barthes’ quasi-psychoanalytic, semiotic re-reading of the ancient story of the Tower of Babel is his argument that the “great ascensional dream” is not only a universal figment of the human imagination, but that it becomes a sign of arrogance rather than mere aspiration whenever it rejects the utilitarian in favor of the purely symbolic. In his words:

Babel was supposed to serve to communicate with God, and yet Babel is a dream which touches much greater depths than that of the theological project; and just as this great ascensional dream, released from its utilitarian prop, is finally what remains in the countless Babels represented by the painters, as if the function of art were to reveal the profound uselessness of objects, just so the Tower, almost immediately disengaged from the scientific considerations which had authorized its birth (it matters very little here that the Tower should be in fact useful), has arisen from a great human dream in which movable and infinite meanings are mingled: it has reconquered the basic uselessness which makes it live in men’s imagination.\textsuperscript{56}

Of course with the construction of the Eiffel Tower there also emerged the celebration of metropolitan verticality as a sign of secular modernity. Yet remarkably, one of the first odes to the Eiffel Tower also turned to Biblical references for justification. For Guillaume Apollinaire, writing in his 1912 poem “Zone,” the tower was not only an impressive monument to metropolitan modernity, but also a divinely-ordained “shepherdess” [bergère] that could serve as a spiritual guide or mystical authority for all the wandering souls of the new age.\textsuperscript{57} Still writing before the onset of two world wars that would shake the Continent for decades, Apollinaire saw the Eiffel Tower as an inspirational icon for modernist aspiration, symbolizing at the same time the anchoring of tradition and the ascension of the new. Like many of his contemporaries, his poetics refers back to Judeo-Christian thought while at the same time appealing to various alternatives to it, from the mystical to the scientific. According to Michel de Certeau, “Mysticism is the anti-Babel. It is the search for a common language, after language has been shattered. It is the invention of a ‘language of the angels’ because that of man has been disseminated.”\textsuperscript{58} Perhaps much the

\textsuperscript{55} Lanoux, Armand, ed. \textit{La Tour Eiffel} (Paris: Éditions de la différence, 1980), 46. In the original French: “contre l’érection, en plein cœur de notre capitale, de l’inutile et monstrueuse Tour Eiffel que la malignité publique, souvent empreinte de bon sens et d’esprit de justice, a déjà baptisée de Tour de Babel.”


same could also be said for modernist appeals to science. For as we shall see, Apollinaire was not alone in referring to both spirituality and technology in representing the modernist search for a common language as both a nostalgic longing for cyclical return as well as an assertive aspiration for vertical transcendence.

Paris remained the pivotal center for Apollinaire’s nostalgic and aspirational poetics both before and during the war, although an important model for “Zone” was most likely “Easter in New York” [Les Pâques à New York], a poem that Blaise Cendrars wrote after spending the winter and spring of 1912 in the ascendant American city. It was only after returning to Paris from New York that Cendrars became acquainted with Apollinaire as well as Robert and Sonia Delaunay, Fernand Léger, Marc Chagall and Amedeo Modigliani, among others. As his poem demonstrates, New York at this time was emerging as a major new capital of modernist culture as well as a source of mystical re-enchantment.

That said, Paris continued to be recognized as the foremost cosmopolitan capital during this time, and the Eiffel Tower was its most recognizable modernist symbol. In his visual poem “Lettre-océan,” Apollinaire depicted it from above as a beacon of international communication, with trans-Atlantic radio waves connecting Germany, France and the Mayans of Mexico along with the rest of the world. Radio waves were in fact first discovered only two years before the tower was completed, and soon after the otherwise mainly
symbolic structure took on an additional utilitarian role as an antenna for the transmission of wireless signals. In addition to the image of the radiating tower, the poem depicts a second shape that suggests the concentric grooves of a Gramophone record, and together they represent modernist Paris as a sun-like center of telegraphic energy promising to unite the world in revolutionary lyricism.

Excerpt from “Lettre-Océan,” in *Calligrammes*, 59

The simultaneous defense of “l’art pour l’art” and revolution for revolution’s sake was later made explicit in the *transition* manifesto “Revolution of the Word,” published in June, 1929 and signed by editors Eugene Jolas and Elliot Paul as well as Kay Boyle, Hart Crane, Harry Crosby, and Stuart Gilbert, among others. The journal’s later manifesto on ascension for ascension’s sake was arguably more representative of its editor’s vision, however: published under the title “Poetry is Vertical” in March 1932, it was spearheaded by Jolas and signed by Hans Arp, Samuel Beckett, Carl Einstein, Thomas McGreevey, Georges Pelorson, Theo Rutra (a pseudonym for Jolas), James J. Sweeney and Ronald Symond. 59

Aside from James Joyce, who was their contemporary, the most inspiring pioneer for the cosmopolitan poetics of these writers was evidently Apollinaire: Jolas translated Apollinaire’s “Icarian Poem” for the opening to his anthology *Vertical*, and Beckett translated “Zone” for a special post-World War II edition of *transition* that was published in 1950. Apollinaire’s cosmopolitanism was short-lived, however, for after he entered the Great War as a foot soldier for his adopted French homeland, his idealistic poetics of internationalism gave way to a more realistic and melancholic patriotism. Remarkably, his perspective toward the Eiffel Tower changed drastically, as well. As we shall see, this is

59 “Poetry is Vertical” in *Transition* 21 (1932) and Jolas, Eugene. *Critical Writings*, 266
especially apparent when comparing “Zone” to his later visual poem “2nd Gunnery Driver” [2e canonnier conducteur], in which we see the triangular shape of the tower standing for nationalist French hubris as opposed to peaceful, cosmopolitan communication. Despite this obvious indulgence in chauvinism, Apollinaire’s poetics continued to serve as an inspirational force for avant-garde internationalism in the following two decades. After World War II, however, a new shift in reception took place that was exemplified by Beckett’s translation of “Zone”: cutting all references to the Eiffel Tower as a “shepherdess,” it seems to suggest that post-World War II poetry no longer aspired to be vertical – or, for that matter, French.  

Apollinaire’s “Zone” opens through poetic apostrophe: after addressing a familiar “tu,” the second line of the poem turns to the Eiffel Tower as its subject, and so the reader is immediately positioned to identify with the tower as well as whatever it might stand for symbolically. Both the addressee and the tower are in turn characterized as struggling with a kind of modernist recapitulation of the eighteenth-century querelle des anciens et des modernes, and what Apollinaire represents as the continually “new” and “simple” reinvention of religion:

À la fin tu es las de ce monde ancien
Bergère ô tour Eiffel le troupeau des ponts bêle ce matin
Tu en as assez de vivre dans l’antiquité grecque et romaine
Ici même les automobiles ont l’air d’être anciennes
La religion seule est restée toute neuve la religion
Est restée simple comme les hangars de Port-Aviation

- - -

At last you are tired of this elderly world
Shepherdess O Eiffel Tower this morning the bridges are bleating
You’re fed up living with antiquity
Even the automobiles are antiques
Religion alone remains entirely new religion
Remains as simple as an airport hangar

60 This anti-Verticalist turn had already been recognized by W.H. Auden when he penned his own Icarian poem “Musée des Beaux Arts” in 1938. Auden wrote it just after he had returned from reporting on the Sino-Japanese war to a Europe on the verge of its own collapse into war, and just before his crossing of the Atlantic to become an American instead. For an illuminating interpretation of Auden’s poem in relation to World War II and contemporary developments in art history, see Nemerov, Howard. “The Flight of Form: Auden, Bruegel, and the Turn to Abstraction in the 1940s” in Critical Inquiry vol. 31 no. 4 (Summer, 2005)

Here we find Paris depicted as a modern pastoral city, with the tall tower standing as a guiding shepherdess and the bridges stretching outward in the metaphorical form of a bleating herd. Automobiles have apparently become antiquated, perhaps due to the rise of aviation, which in turn seems to belong more to mythic time than to contemporary history. Curiously, the people of the city – whether flâneurs, crowds, or local residents – are still apparently absent, leaving open the question of whether the speaker of the poem is actually a part of social life or instead exists somehow outside of it.

If the poem begins with a recognition of the persistence of religion in general, what is addressed next is Christianity in particular, thus further establishing the affinity between the terrestrial tower and the Christian idea of God: “In all Europe only you O Christianism are not old” [Seul en Europe tu n’es pas antique ô Christianisme]. In this way, European modernity is explicitly defined in relation to religion – and Christianity in particular – rather than in relation to the enlightenment project, scientific reason, or secularization. In the next stanza, the lyric voice finally reveals itself in the first person as a wanderer in the city who is schooled in ideas of Christian ascension, and who finds his faith confirmed even while marveling at twentieth-century technological advances in aviation and architecture:

C’est le Christ qui mont au ciel mieux que les aviateurs
Il détient le record du monde pour la hauteur

Pupille Christ de l’œil
Vingtième pupille des siècles il sait y faire
Et changé en oiseau ce siècle comme Jésus monte dans l’air
Les diables dans les abîmes lèvent la tête pour le regarder
Ils disent qu’il imite Simon Mage en Judée
Ils crient s’il sait voler qu’on l’appelle voleur
Les anges voltigent autour du joli voltigeur
Icare Enoch Elie Apollonius de Thyane
Flottent autour du premier aéroplane
Ils s’écartent parfois pour laisser passer ceux que transporte la Sainte-Eucharistie

Ces prêtres qui montent éternellement élevant l’hostie
L’avion se pose enfin sans refermer les ailes
Le ciel s’emplit alors de millions d’hirondelles
À tire-d’aile viennent les corbeaux les faucons les hiboux
D’Afrique arrivent les ibis les flamants les marabouts
L’oiseau Roc célébré par les conteurs et les poètes
Plane tenant de l’horizon en poussant un grand cri
Et d’Amérique vient le petit colibri
De Chine sont venus les phis longs et souples
Qui n’ont qu’une seule aile et qui volent par couples
Puis voici la colombe esprit immaculé
Qu’escortent l’oiseau-lyre et le paon ocellé
Le phénix ce bûcher qui soi-même s’engendre
Un instant voile tout de son ardente cendre
Les sirènes laissant le périlleux détroits
Arrivent en chantant bellement toutes trios
Et tous aigle phénix et pihis de la Chine
Fraternisent avec la volonté machine

Behold the Christ who flies higher than aviators
He holds the world’s record for altitude

Christ pupil of the eye
Twentieth pupil of the centuries knows its stuff
And bird-changed this century like Jesus climbs the sky
Devils in the abyss look up to watch
They say this century mimics Simon Magus in Judea
It takes a thief to catch a thief they cry
Angels flutter around the pretty trapeze act
Icarus Enoch Elijah Apollonius of Tyana
Hover as close to the airplane as they can
Sometimes they give way to other men hauling the Eucharist
Priests eternally climbing the elevating Host
The plane descends at last its wings unfolded
The sky bursts into a million swallows
Full speed come the crows the owls and falcons
From Africa ibis storks flamingoes
The Roc-bird famous with writers and poets
Glides Adam’s skull the original head in its talons
The horizon screams an eagle pouncing
And from America there comes a hummingbird
From China sinuous peehees
Who have only one wing and who fly in couples
And here’s a dove immaculate spirit
Escorted by lyre-bird and shimmery peacock
Phoenix the pyre the self-resurrected
Obscures everything ardently briefly with ash
The sirens abandon their perilous channels
Each one singing more beautifully arrives
Everyone eagle Phoenix Chinese peehees
Eager to befriend a machine that flies

In the next stanza, “you,” the addressee, finally appears embodied on the scene as a post-Baudelairian, twentieth-century flâneur – a wanderer in a newly automotive, vertical city that appears to be both pastoral and modern at the same time: “You are walking in Paris alone inside a crowd / Herds of buses bellow and come too close” [Maintenant tu marches dans
Paris tout seul parmi la foule / Des troupeaux d’autobus mugissant près de toi roulent]. This city is not actually peaceful, as would be expected from a pastoral scene, but rather full of violence, anguish and shame. Not only do the buses come too close, but “love-anguish clutches your throat” [L’angoisse de l’amour te serre le goisier] and “You are ashamed to overhear yourself praying / You laugh at yourself and the laughter crackles like hellfire” [Tu te moques de toi et comme le feu de l’Enfer ton rire pétille / Les étincelles de ton rire donnent le fond de ta vie]. And just before the poem takes temporary leave of Paris (to Chartres, the Riviera, Prague, Marseilles, Coblenz, Rome, Amsterdam…), it offers up a strange, two-line stanza of inexplicable violence and degeneration: “You are walking in Paris the women are bloodsoaked / It was and I have no wish to remember it was the end of beauty” [Aujourd’hui tu marches dans Paris les femmes sont ensanglantées / C’était et je voudrais ne pas m’en souvenir c’était au déclin de la beauté]. Thus although the vertical city offers great promises of modernist ascension, it nonetheless also points to an ominous “end” or “decline of beauty,” a mournful finale following from the overwhelming sublimity of the city.

“Soleil cou coupé,” the poem’s startling conclusion, may be translated perhaps best as “sun slit throat.” Yet the meaning varies depending on where the emphasis falls: it could be read as “sun slit throat,” “sun: slit throat,” or “sun slit throat.” It is a visceral image, and yet at the same time strangely impossible to visualize according to any linear, metonymic logic of realism. Is it then metaphorical, ironic, disjointed, fantastical? Perhaps we might even envision it as a kind of cinematic cut, something like the famous surrealist montage in Un Chien Andalou (Luis Buñuel, 1929) if we simply substitute the sun for the moon and the throat for the woman’s eye. Indeed, although Apollinaire had yet to discover Surrealism when he wrote “Zone,” it was he who in fact coined the term as early as 1917. Later, Louis Aragon would define Surrealism in remarkably spatial terms as “the vertigo of the modern” in his 1926 book Paris Peasant, and Aimé Césaire ultimately reoriented it toward the colonial “tropics” by adopting the line Soleil cou coupé for the title for his 1948 poetry collection.

It could be argued that Apollinaire acknowledges a kind of cultural relativism in his poem, especially given its appeal to various non-Christian figures of ascension: Icarus, the Roc, the Phoenix, birds from around the world, and, of course, the figure of the airplane. Yet nonetheless, he concludes with the assertion that all of them, along with “your South Sea and Guinean fetishes,” are “Christ of another shape another faith / Subordinate Christs of uncertain hopes” [tes fétiches d’océanie et de Guinée / Ils sont des Christ d’une autre forme et d’une autre...

62 For Apollinaire’s first use of the term, see his letter to Paul Dermee dated March 1917, Oeuvres complètes, IV, 886. For a summary of how his concept of surrealism compares to that of Breton, see Willard Bohn, The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Winter, 1977), 197-210. We might also speculate that Georges Bataille had Apollinaire in mind when in 1927 he wrote under the title “The Solar Anus” the shocking line: “I want to have my throat slashed while violating the girl to whom I will have been able to say: you are the night.” Bataille, Georges. Visions of Excess (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

63 Aragon defines surrealism as follows: “I announce to the world this momentous news item: a new vice has just been born, man has acquired one more source of vertigo – Surrealism, offspring of frenzy and darkness.” [J’annonce au monde ce fait divers de première grandeur: un nouveau vice vient de naître, un vertige de plus est donné à l’homme le Surrealisme, fils de la frénésie et de l’ombre]. He then returns to the idea of “vertigo” later with the line: “Lucidity came to me when I at last succumbed to the vertigo of the modern.” [La clarté me vint enfin que j’avais le vertige du moderne]. Aragon, Louis. Paris Peasant, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (New York: Exact Change, 2004), pgs. 65 and 114, and Le paysan de Paris (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), pgs. 79 and 139.
croyance / Ce sont les Christ inférieurs des obscures espérances]. And so despite the poem’s hopeful gesture to cosmopolitanism, it evidently upholds its own Christian chauvinism in the end.

Apollinaire’s chauvinism became still more pointed in the patriotic wartime poems of *Calligrammes*, but the first part of this collection, written soon after *Alcools* in December and January of 1913, is resolutely peaceful in tone and cosmopolitan in subject matter. For instance, the poem “Liens” (translated as “Chains,” though perhaps “Bonds” is more accurate) oscillates between the aspiration for harmony and the melancholy of discord, although its overarching message is of international simultaneity: sounds of bells ringing across Europe are connected to “rails binding the nations” [Rails qui ligotent les nations] and men “free of all chains” or “bonds” [Libres de tous liens] to whom the lyric subject calls, “Let’s join hands” [Donnons-nous la main]. In the next stanza, we find “Towers of Babel changed to bridges” [Tours de Babel changées en ponts] together with “a single chain” of lovers, so that “Cords and Concord” [Cordes et Concorde] come together to signify a horizontal chain of metonymic desire. The image of the tower extending along a horizontal plane instead of a vertical axis also appears in “Windows” [Les Fenêtres], first published in the catalogue for Robert Delaunay’s exhibition in Berlin in January, 1913. Here we read: “Towers are the streets” [Les Tours sont les rues]. In the poem simply titled “Turning Tower” [Tour], the Eiffel Tower appears as a figure of circular turning rather than vertical ascent: “The Ocean swells to the West / The Tower to the Ferris Wheel / Appeals” [L’Océan se gonfle à l’Ouest / La Tour à la Roue / S’adresse]. Here the Eiffel Tower appears to serve as the metropolitan pivot for the universal turning of the world, having in fact first been presented along with the ferris wheel at the 1889 Universal Exposition in Paris. Apollinaire first published this poem in the form of a postcard dedicated explicitly to Delaunay’s Berlin exhibition, and Delaunay had in fact already suggested the tower’s universal appeal by writing on the back of one of his paintings: “Universal Exhibition 1889. The Tower addresses the Universe” [Exposition universelle 1889. La Tour à l’Univers s’adresse].

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These tropes of the tower represent the potential of transcendent power to turn outward toward the simultaneous and universal. Jacques Derrida suggests a similar point through his playful digressions on turning towers in his book *Rogues*: “The turn makes up the whole and makes a whole with itself; it consists in totalizing, in totalizing itself, and thus in gathering itself by tending toward simultaneity, and it is thus that the turn, as a whole, is one with itself, together with itself.”

He then goes on to relate these spatial metaphors of cosmic and sovereign power to the politics of democracy by arguing that “the thought of cosmopolitical democracy perhaps presupposes a theocosmogony, a cosmology, and a vision of the world determined by the spherical roundness of the world.” In contrast to such

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65 Derrida continues here: “We are here at the same time around and at the center of the circle or the sphere where the values of ipseity are gathered together, the values of the together [ensemble], of the ensemble and the semblable, of simultaneity and gathering together, but also of the simulacrum, simulation, and assimilation. For let us not forget that, like the circle and the sphere, the turn (all turns, [tour], and all turrets, all towers [tour], including the turret of a chateau or the turning surface of a potter’s wheel [tour] requires surfaces, a surface area, lines that come back round to or toward themselves according to a certain motivation, a certain mover, and a possible rotational movement, but always, simultaneously, around a center, a pivot or axle, which, even it too ends up turning, does not change place and remains quasi immobile.” Derrida, Jacques. *Rogues* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005), 12. For Peter Sloterdijk’s alternative theory of the sphere as a figure of globalization, see especially his *Sphären II: Glauben* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1999)

66 Derrida, 18.
appeals to cosmopolitan freedom, however, Apollinaire’s trope of simultaneity turned more nationalistic after he entered into battle in the Great War and became not only a poet for the aesthetic avant-garde but also a soldier in the ranks of the military. This is especially apparent in his visual poem “2e cannonier conducteur,” originally published in the first issue of the Zurich-based futurist magazine Der Mistral on March 3, 1915, in which the Eiffel Tower appears as a mocking, anti-German mouthpiece for French patriotism. No longer a spiritual guide for cosmopolitan peace, the former “shepherdess” has now gone rogue. Here, in addition to calligrams in the shape of a trumpet or cannon, a soldier’s boot, and a cannon shell, the words appearing in the architectural form of the Notre Dame Cathedral read: “MEMORIES OF PARIS BEFORE THE WAR THEY WILL BE MUCH SWEETER AFTER VICTORY.” Right beside it, the calligram of the Eiffel Tower may be translated loosely as: “HAIL WORLD WHOSE ELOQUENT TONGUE I AM THAT ITS MOUTH OH PARIS STICKS OUT AND ALWAYS WILL AT THE GERMANS.”

![Calligram from Apollinaire's "2e cannonier conducteur"](image)

Apollinaire, from “2e cannonier conducteur”

Although parts of the poem can be read as light-hearted or humorous, they are not ironic. For when Romain Rolland complained about the poem’s form, Apollinaire responded in terms of politics: “Romain Rolland is making unpleasant and very uncalled-for demonstrations, almost pro-German. As for me, in February I published a poem in Zurich, ‘2e Cannonier Conducteur,’ which leaves no doubt about my anti-Hun feelings.” [Romain Rolland fait de désagréables et très déplacées manifestations presqu’en faveur de l’Allemagne. Moi j’ai publié au mois de février à Zurich un poème intitulé ‘2e Cannonier Conducteur,’ qui ne laissait aucun doute sur mes sentiments anti-boches.]67

67 Apollinaire, Calligrammes, 411
Patriotic wartime sentiments are also evident in some of Apollinaire’s critical writings. Arguing in his 1917 lecture “The New Spirit and the Poets” that "art increasingly has a country," he concluded: “Art will only cease being national the day that the whole universe, living in the same climate, in houses built in the same style, speaks the same language with the same accent – that is to say, never.” Here the dream of a universal language – symbolized by the nostalgia for the primeval Babel – has been all but abandoned. While in “Zone” the aviator stood as a Christian figure of salvation, by this point airplanes have come to represent the violence of warfare. For instance, in the opening stanza to “The Hills” [Les Collines], which Apollinaire began in 1913 but then completed during the war, we read: “High over Paris one day / Two enormous airplanes fought…./ One was all my youth / And the other was the future / They raged against each other / So struggled with Lucifer / The radiant-winged archangel.” [Au-dessus de Paris un jour / Combattaient deux grands avions… / L’un était toute ma jeunesse / Et l’autre c’était l’avenir / Ils se combattaient avec rage / Ainsi fit contre Lucifer / L’archange aux ailes radieuses]. As we shall see, this conflict between the traditional figure of Lucifer from Catholic school teachings and the more futuristic appeals to modern ascension would also become a structuring dialectic for the aesthetic education of Stephen Dedalus in Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.

Apollinaire’s oscillation between cosmopolitanism and nationalism ultimately suggests a larger conflict between the liberal tendencies of modernism and the more radical agonism of the avant-garde. According to Walter Adamson, drawing from the theories of Renato Poggioli and Jürgen Habermas, Apollinaire’s poetry is avant-garde in the sense that it was “conceived as a performance, as an effort to influence that its audience can accept or reject but that it cannot directly engage.” He goes on to argue: “If avant-garde works of art are performances, then the public sphere in which they are presented is one of agonistic exchange rather than mutual dialogue.” This should help explain not only the difference between the liberal communication of “Liens” and the conflicted topography of “Les Collines,” but also between the inclusive, universalizing towers of “Zone,” “Tour” and “Lettre-Océan” and the more aggressive tower of “2e Cannonier Conducteur.” Apollinaire’s oscillation between cosmopolitanism and patriotism is also represented by his shifting


69 In a later essay, Habermas himself discusses the concept of simultaneity in arguing that cultural simultaneity may turn coercive or compulsory, and thus oppressively homogenizing. Under the title “The Postnational Constellation” in his book of that same name (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), he draws from Ernst Bloch’s concept of “non-simultaneity” to argue that forced synchronization often results in homogenization: “The clocks of Western Civilization keep the tempo for the compulsory simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous. This commodified, homogenous culture doesn’t just impose itself on distant lands, of course; in the West too, it levels out even the strongest national differences, and weakens even the strongest local traditions.” Despite this critique, however, Habermas argues that political simultaneity is ultimately a liberatory counter-balance to cultural homogenization and economic determinism, and so even here he maintains his politics of “normative agreement.” We may thus presume that he also remains in agreement with Kant, who stated in his essay on “Perpetual Peace” that, “On its coercive authority, public right will subsequently be based.” Quoted in Kant, Immanuel. “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch” in Kant: Political Writings, Reiss, Hans, ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 117

70 Adamson, Walter L. “Apollinaire’s Politics: Modernism, Nationalism, and the Public Sphere” in Modernism/Modernity 6.3 (1999), 44
representations of “simultanéité.” For while the earlier poems attempt to represent simultaneity as a vertical transcendence of spatial distances, national borders, and particular differences, the latter poems represent simultaneity as a form of horizontal immanence and conflict. That is, while the former represent the metaphorical avant-garde of the aesthetic imagination, the latter extend that radical energy to the literal avant-garde of the battlefront, and thereby turn whatever politics they might advocate into a “politics by other means,” as Clausewitz defined warfare.

According to Benedict Anderson, medieval and messianic conceptions of providential simultaneity along time are very much different from more modern ideas of simultaneity across time, which Walter Benjamin critiqued in terms of “homogenous, empty time.” Drawing from Benjamin as well as Erich Auerbach, Anderson suggests that it is only the latter, more “modern” idea of chronological simultaneity that turns the vertical idea of the eternal into a more horizontal image of spatial contemporaneity, thereby producing a sense of the “meanwhile” that brings different people and places together through an imagined belief in shared community:

Our own conception of simultaneity has been a long time in the making, and its emergence is certainly connected, in ways that have yet to be well studied, with the development of the secular sciences. But it is a conception of such fundamental importance that, without taking it fully into account, we will find it difficult to probe the obscure genesis of nationalism. What has come to take the place of the mediaeval conception of simultaneity-long-time is, to borrow again from Benjamin, an idea of “homogeneous, empty time,” in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar.

Why this transformation should be so important for the birth of the imagined community of the nation can best be seen if we consider the basic structure of two forms of imagining which first flowered in Europe in the eighteenth century: the novel and the newspaper. For these forms provided the technical means for “re-presenting” the kind of imagined community that is the nation.71

By contrast, for Apollinaire, who wrote poetry instead of novels, newspaper articles, or political philosophy, the meaning of simultaneity is above all a question of personal experience. In his wartime poem that bears the title “Simultanéités,” the speaker suggests that the deadening sights and sounds of the battlefront can only be escaped in the realm of the memorial imagination. Comparable to the towering shepherdess for the avant-garde poet in “Zone,” here it is the beloved Madeleine who represents the “lofty beacon” [le haut Phare] for the foot soldier’s heart. Calling out “O beacon-blossom my memories” [O phare-fleur mes souvenirs] in the hope of one day returning home to her, he suggests that such a return may only be possible in the private realm of memory rather than the public sphere of politics.

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71 Anderson, Benedict. Imagined Communities (Verso, 1991), 25
Kafka and the Irony of Transcendence

Sometime after Franz Kafka visited Paris in 1910 and 1911, according to Gustav Janouch’s rendition of their conversations, he became impressed by Apollinaire’s depiction of the city in “Zone,” which he read both in translation and in its original French publication in Alcools. “Those poems, and a cheap new edition of Flaubert’s letters, were the first French books I held in my hand after the war,” he is quoted as saying. “Apollinaire has combined his visual experiences into a kind of revelation. He is a virtuoso.” According to Janouch, Kafka went on to offer a critique of this idea of virtuosity, however, and ultimately suggested that Apollinaire’s works are more like the sleight-of-hand of a comedian, juggler, or film entertainer than true poetry:

I am against all virtuosity. The virtuoso rises above his subject because of his juggler’s facility. But can a poet be superior to his subject? No! [...] Virtuosity is the monopoly of comedians. But they always start where the artist leaves off. One can see that in Apollinaire’s poem. He concentrates his different experiences in space into a super-personal vision of time. What Apollinaire displays for us is a film in words. He is a juggler, who conjures up for the reader an entertaining picture. No poet does that, only a comedian, a juggler. The poet tries to ground his vision in the daily experience of the reader.72

If Janouch’s anecdote is accurate, then Kafka may have been projecting some of his own conflicted feelings about aesthetics onto Apollinaire to some extent, for he struggled between just these poles of gravity and levity, tragedy and comedy, grounded experience and aspirational fantasy throughout his literary career. While Apollinaire asserted his aspirational aesthetics through avant-garde poetic will, Kafka maintained a critical, ironic distance from the poetics of vertical transcendence despite his obviously strong sense of desire or longing. Like Apollinaire, however, he developed a particular interest in the figure of the tower: in addition to clock towers appearing at various points in his writings,73 he focused on the Tower of Babel in a number of ironic parables written during World War I, especially “The City Coat of Arms,” “The Great Wall and the Tower of Babel,” “The Pit of Babel,” and the aphorism referred to simply as “The Tower of Babel.”74 This last one reads, in its entirety:

73 According to Erich Heller’s interpretation, the discrepancy between the narrator’s sense of time and the time defined by the clock tower in “Give it Up!” is comparable to Kafka’s description of his mental breakdown in his diary entry of January 16, 1922, in which he describes a discord or disynchrony between the inner clock of his soul and the outer clock of society: “The clocks were not in unison; the inner one runs crazily on at a devilish or demonic or in any case inhuman pace, the outer one limps along at its usual speed. What else can happen but that the worlds split apart, and they do split apart, or at least clash in a fearful manner.” [Die Uhren stimmen nicht überein, die innere jagt in einer teuflischen oder dämonischen oder jedenfalls unmenschlichen Art, die äußere geht stockend ihren gewöhnlichen Gang. Was kann anders geschehen, als daß sich die zwei verschiedenen Welten trennen, und sie trennen sich oder reiben zumindest auseinander in einer fürchterlichen Art.] The Basic Kafka, 262
If it had been possible to build the Tower of Babel without ascending it, the work would have been permitted.

[Wenn es möglich gewesen wäre, den Turm von Babel zu erbauen, ohne ihn zu erklettern, es wäre erlaubt worden.]

While it may be easy to call this parabolic fragment ironic, its actual meaning is difficult to discern. According to Kierkegaard, whom Kafka read closely and who was the first to develop a comprehensive philosophy of the concept, irony is an “absolute infinite negativity” that “elevates” us above a finite point of view and thus enables us to “look down” on it from a higher level of understanding. In turn, for Kierkegaard, this ironic elevation constitutes a uniquely vexing form of freedom: “Irony is indeed free, free from the sorrows of actuality, but also free from its joys, free from its blessing, for in as much as it has nothing higher than itself, it can receive no blessing, since it is always the lesser that is blessed by the greater. This is the freedom that irony craves.”

He thus defines irony as a “negatively liberating activity” because, although it “cuts the bonds that restrain speculation” in order to raise us into a “higher actuality,” it does so only through “destroying” the lower actuality that it left behind:

Here it is apparent to what extent the negation that destroys actuality is brought to rest in a higher actuality. We are lifted up by the downfall of the best, but this uplifting is of a very negative kind. It is irony’s uplifting, resembling here the envy of the gods, yet it is envious not only of what is great and outstanding but is just as envious of what is lowly and insignificant, on the whole, envious of finitude. When the great perishes in the world, this is tragic, but poetry reconciles us to this tragedy by showing us that it is the true that is victorious. Herein lies the uplifting and the upbuilding. Thus we are not uplifted by the destruction of the great but are reconciled to its destruction by the victory of what is true, and we are uplifted by its victory.

In this way, Kierkegaard’s philosophical concept of irony depends on spatial metaphors of vertical uplift or upbuilding as well as of downfall or destruction. As he further argues, these two movements in fact go together in a way that is both comic and tragic,

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75 Kafka, Parables and Paradoxes, 34-35
77 Kierkegaard, The Concept of Irony, 123. Obviously writing from a nineteenth-century age of seafaring, he further explains that this “helps to shove off from the purely empirical sandbanks and to venture out upon the ocean.” Returning to this analogy again, he describes irony as a “leviathan in the sea” in a later passage: “Irony…knows it has the power to start all over again if it so pleases; anything that happened before is not binding, and just as irony in infinite freedom enjoys its critical gratification in the theoretical realm, so it enjoys in the realm of practice a similar divine freedom that knows no bonds, no chains, but plays with abandon and unrestraint, gambols like a leviathan in the sea. Irony is indeed free, free from the sorrows of actuality, but also free from its joys, free from its blessing, for inasmuch as it has nothing higher than itself, it can receive no blessing, since it is always the lesser that is blessed by the greater.” Kierkegaard, The Concept of Irony, 279-80
78 Kierkegaard, The Concept of Irony, 322
because irony ultimately achieves elevation only through a kind of cathartic recognition of destruction. That said, mere recognition or pleasure in witnessing such destruction is not enough to bring us to the higher actuality, for an “infinite hope” must also be achieved in the process:

But if in the tragedy I see only the destruction of the hero and am uplifted by that, if in the tragedy I become aware only of the nothingness of human affairs, if the tragedy pleases me in the same way that comedy does by showing me the nothingness of what is great, just as comedy shows me the nothingness of what is lowly – then the higher actuality has not emerged….The something more that can come from this dilution in an infinite hope is nothing more or less than the bliss implicit in the perishing of everything, the desolation and the emptiness in which there certainly is far too much peace and quiet.79

This existential irony is presumably what Camus had in mind when he interpreted Kafka’s work in terms of both hope and the absurd, although his emphasis on tragic themes arguably missed a great deal of Kafka’s humor. In turn, Kierkegaard’s idea of liberation through absolute negation seems compatible with Max Brod’s claim that Kafka embraced a kind of “negative theology,” although Kafka’s resistance to both religion and negativity – not to mention absolutism – suggests otherwise, as we shall see.80

Walter Benjamin offers another, perhaps more useful definition of irony as a force that works to expose, undo, or even paradoxically overcome the transcendental. “The ironization of form,” he writes, “is like the storm which lifts up [aufheben] the curtain of the transcendental order of art and reveals it for what it is, in this order as well as in the unmediated existence of the work.” Here we may recognize an allusion to the Hegelian idea of Aufhebung as a kind of “uplift,” a somewhat more compelling translation than the more common but awkward term “sublation” (and similarly, Jacques Derrida translates this term into French as “relief” in his own remarkably spatial critique of Hegel, “The Pit and the Pyramid”).81 In a line that appears closely-related to Kafka’s architectural figure, Benjamin concludes: “Formal irony…represents the paradoxical attempt still to construct the edifice by deconstructing it [am Gebilde noch durch Abbruch zu bauen], and so to demonstrate the relationship of the work to the idea within the work itself.”82 It is thus by constructing

79 Kierkegaard, The Concept of Irony, 322
80 “I was not, like Kierkegaard, introduced into life by the tired hand of Christianity and I did not, like the Zionists, catch the last corner of the disappearing prayer shawl of the Jews. I am either an end or a beginning.” Quoted in Jean Wahl, “Kierkegaard and Kafka” in The Kafka Problem, ed. Angel Flores (New York: New Directions, 1946), 271
82 Quoted in de Man, 183. Interestingly, Wayne Booth also depends on spatial metaphors in his more structuralist theory of irony in terms of the “construction” and “elevation” of a stable or unstable “edifice,” and its interpretation as a hermeneutics of “digging” beneath that rhetorical structure to uncover its actual meaning. Unlike Benjamin, however, he thinks of irony as primarily reconstructive rather than deconstructive: “In sum, the metaphor of buildings and reconstructions, clumsy as it may seem, has several advantages: 1. It reminds us of inescapable complexities: in addition to whatever one takes as a final message, there are always other unspoken
through deconstructing or building through demolishing that irony finds its contradictory yet nonetheless potentially productive method.

Kafka’s trope of the Tower of Babel may thus be read as a deconstructive irony of transcendence rather than some more direct form of iconoclastic resistance or religious allegiance. In turn, it represents not only his interest in Jewish tradition and Biblical exegesis, but also his investment in the modernist aesthetics of aspiration, which was arguably informed by ideas of transcendence derived from his readings of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. According to Robert Alter’s interpretation:

This reader of the Bible sees the vision of a human edifice touching the heavens as a compelling aspiration, man in a perhaps Nietzschean fashion reaching beyond his own limits, striving to become more than himself. If the idea of human self-transcendence could have been nurtured without the transgressive act of its implementation, the Tower would have been no sin.

We may thus argue that Kafka approached the Hebrew Bible less as a religious book of truth or doctrine than as a compelling work of literature to be appreciated, imitated, and, potentially, transcended. This is not to say that he aimed to oppose either religion in general or Judaism in particular, but rather that he regarded Biblical scripture from the perspective

beliefs that may or may not serve as firm foundations; there are always inferential processes between these foundations and the conclusions that rest on them; there are always both an incongruity of content and an intended difference in ‘elevation’ between the two ‘conclusions,’ one of them not states; and there is always thus an implied claim to superiority of total vision in the final view of those who see the irony and thus a potential look downward on those who dwell in error….2. The metaphor also dramatizes the possibility of an unlimited variety of ‘distances’ between the dwelling places. The differences can be of any size and in any direction on any axis of belief, knowledge, or value – any direction, that is, except ‘downward.’”


83 For a recent argument on Kafka’s reading of Nietzsche, see Wagner, Benno. “Insuring Nietzsche: Kafka’s Files” in New German Critique, no. 99 (Fall 2006). Although Kafka never mentioned Nietzsche in any of his diaries or letters, comparisons between his works and those of the German philosopher became so established that Max Brod eventually felt compelled to argue for their “pure opposition” in his post-war book Über Franz Kafka: “In the history of the last century, Nietzsche is Kafka’s antipode with almost mathematical exactitude. Some Kafka interpreters only demonstrate their lack of instinct when trying to bring together Kafka and Nietzsche on one level of analysis – as if there existed even the vaguest ties or comparisons and not just pure opposition.” Quoted in Wagner, 84. For Wagner’s close reading of “Description of a Struggle” as a parody of Nietzsche’s Thus Spoke Zarathustra, see his "Zarathustra auf dem Laurenziberg: Quételet, Nietzsche und Mach mit Kafka,” in Literarische Experimentskulturen: Poetologien des Experiments im 19. Jahrhundert, ed. Marcus Krause and Nicolas Pethes (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2005), 225-40. See also Bridgewater, Patrick. Kafka and Nietzsche (Bonn: Bouvier, 1974) for an early, extended comparison of these two writers, and Rheinhold Grimm’s remarkably mocking critique of it under the title “Comparing Kafka and Nietzsche” in The German Quarterly, Vol. 52, No. 3 (May, 1979).

84 Kafka refers to Kierkegaard frequently in his diaries and letters, but according to Jean Wahl, his tendency to affirm through negation often appears more akin to Nietzsche’s philosophy than that of Kierkegaard or, as Max Brod suggested, Jewish negative theology. Wahl, Jean. “Kierkegaard and Kafka” in The Kafka Problem, ed. Angel Flores (New York: New Directions, 1946), 268. See also Sheppard, Richard. “Kafka, Kierkegaard and the K’s: Theology, Psychology and Fiction” in Journal of Literature & Theology, Vol. 3, No. 5 (November 1991)

of imagination rather than faith. Unlike Nietzsche, however, he was drawn more to self-deny than to the will to power, and unlike Kierkegaard, he preferred aesthetic devotion to the religious leap of faith. If there is something mystical or spiritual about his poetics, it should thus be understood more in terms of art than theology. When Janouch suggested to him, “So poetry tends toward religion,” Kafka replied in the negative: “I would not say that. But certainly to prayer.”

For Maurice Blanchot, who refers to this same exchange in his study of literary space, Kafka’s works represent the principle of “salvation through literature.” Although Blanchot overlooks Kafka’s ironic aesthetic by focusing instead on his intellectual interest in mysticism, his argument is compelling especially with regard to Kafka’s diary entry of September 25, 1917: “I can still draw momentary satisfaction from works like A Country Doctor, provided I can still write such things (very unlikely). But happiness only if I can raise the world into the pure, the true, and the immutable.”

Here again we find Kafka’s aesthetics of aspiration figured in terms of vertical ascent, an uplifting of the self as well as the lifeworld around it. This may be compared not only to the philosophies of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, but also to Hegel’s concept of Aufhebung, each of which may be read in terms of vertical metaphors of space. Curiously, despite Blanchot’s attention to the idea of “literary space,” he says surprisingly little about spatial metaphor, whether in Kafka’s works or those of the other authors he considers. It should nonetheless be clear by now that Kafka’s distinctly spatial imagination is concerned above all with vertical movements of ascent and descent, which may represent either transcendence or decline, depending on their level of irony.

Kafka’s irony of transcendence is perhaps most pointed in his short parable “The Pit of Babel” [Der Schacht von Babel], which reads as follows:

What are you building? – I want to dig a passage. Some progress must be made. My station up there is much too high.
We are digging the pit of Babel.

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86 In this way I am suggesting something more like Harold Bloom’s psychoanalytic theory of the “anxiety of influence” than what one naïve German critic once argued about Kafka in relation to Nietzsche: “The writer Franz Kafka is not an Übermensch in Nietzsche’s sense of the word, for as a Jew he has not yet transcended Christianity.” Quoted in the epigraph to Gilman, Sander. Franz Kafka: The Jewish Patient (New York: Routledge, 1995).

87 Janouch, 47. On the next page, Janouch describes their visit to the Franciscan church in the Jungmannplatz, and quotes Kafka as follows: “Prayer and art are passionate acts of will. One wants to transcend and enhance the will’s normal possibilities. Art like prayer is a hand outstretched in the darkness, seeking for some touch of a grace which will transform it into a hand that bestows gifts. Prayer means casting oneself into the miraculous rainbow that stretches between becoming and dying, to be utterly consumed in it, in order to bring its infinite radiance to bed in the frail little cradle of one’s own existence.” In Janouch, 48.

88 Quoted in Blanchot, 72. Blanchot also attributes the following, very similar words to Kafka: “Literature strives to place things in an agreeable light; the poet is constrained to lift them into the realm of the true, the pure, and the constant.” Janouch however notes that this line was written in his own copy of A Country Doctor, and so he adds the disclaimer: “I do not know whether this is a record of some comment of Kafka’s or my own recorded version of the gist of one of our conversations.” Janouch, 55. Of course it should keep in mind that this may very well apply to the rest of Janouch’s book, as well.
Was baust du? – Ich will einen Gang graben. Es muß ein Fortschritt geschehn.
Zu hoch oben ist mein Standort.
Wir graben den Schacht von Babel.]

89

Here, the aesthetics of aspiration is represented as a struggle to descend rather than to ascend, a curious inversion of the traditional association between transcendence and height, as Emmanuel Levinas describes it in his essay of that name. This may in turn be described in terms of Jean Wahl’s conception of “transdescendence,” a fall back into a “second immanence” through the transcendence of transcendence itself, as opposed to the more familiar sense of “transascendence.” The speaker claims that his “station up there is too high,” and it is apparently because of this spatial metaphor of status, whether ontological or social, that he asserts the desire to go underground. While his construction work involves digging into the ground rather than building on top of it, it still evidently requires hard labor in order to make progress. It may be tempting to read this as an absurdist allegory of melancholic depression, but this seems to miss much of the point of the parable, since just like the protagonist of “The Burrow” (the German title of which is the much more ironic Der Bau – “The Building”), the speaker appears to express desire and determination to construct something new rather than angst or resignation in the passive acknowledgment of decline. Alternatively, it could also be read in relation to the philosophical teachings of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, who calls for us to “go down” to the lower level of everyday life once we achieve the transcendent heights of the Übermensch. According to this reading, Kafka’s shift from the first-person singular of the first line to the plural “we” of the last line would imply an appeal for the elevated individual to accept decline in order to remain a part of human society, similar to the return of Plato’s philosopher-king to the underground cave. However, the irony of the parable is that there is no evidence that any great achievement of enlightenment or progress has in fact been achieved. For in Kafka’s fictions, as Sanford Kwinter suggests, “both transcendence (to go beyond to the interior of the Law) and subjection (the strategic formation of subjectivity – husband, son, citizen, subject) go hand in hand.” This condition may well appear absurd, as Camus argued in his essay on Kafka,.

88 Kafka, Parables and Paradoxes, 45-5, translation amended. This parable was later adapted by the avant-garde industrial music group Einstürzende Neubauten for their song “Der Schacht von Babel.”

89 For Levinas, transcendence takes place as a vertical uplift through the ethical relationship to the Other: “And the structure of this responsibility will show how the Other [Autrui], in the face, challenges us from the greatest depth and the highest height – by opening the very dimension of elevation.” Levinas, Emanuel. “Transcendence and Height” in Basic Philosophical Writings (Indiana University Press, 1996), 17. This is of course the opposite of the resistance to freedom that Sartre discusses in his 1937 essay, The Transcendence of the Ego. In this critique of Husserlian phenomenology, Sartre develops his own spatial metaphor – “the vertigo of possibility” – in order to describe the impersonal, “monstrous spontaneity” of “vertiginous freedom” that attends the excessive consciousness of potentiality and uncertainty. Sartre, Jean-Paul. The Transcendence of the Ego, trans. Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick (New York: The Noonday Press, 1957), pp. 98-100

90 See especially Wahl, Jean. Existence Humaine et Transcendence (Neuchâtel, 1944), 38. For more on the philosophy of immanence, see my discussion of Deleuze and Guattari in my concluding chapter, “On the Horizon.”

91 Kwinter, Sanford. Architectures of Time: Toward a Theory of the Event in Modernist Culture (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 124. Aside from this point, Kwinter generally follows Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (and in turn Bergson and Spinoza) in arguing for the “immanence of desire” in Kafka’s work. From their
but it also suggests a certain tragicomic levity about the irony of transcendence. Sartre suggested a similar point in comparing Camus and Kafka: “Camus’s views are entirely of this earth, and Kafka is the novelist of impossible transcendence; for him, the universe is full of signs that we cannot understand; there is a reverse side to the décor. For Camus, on the contrary, the tragedy of human existence lies in the absence of any transcendence.”

Thus although the speaker of “The Pit of Babel” may indeed persist in his downward struggle with great purpose, he is by no means an absurd nihilist, a bold Übermensch, or a fetishized rhizome. Instead, he is more like the oddly comic creature Odradek in “The Cares of a Family Man” [Die Sorge des Hausvaters], who continues to survive the patriarchal order – literally, “to live on” [überleben] – even while ironically going under:

I ask myself, to no purpose, what is likely to happen to him? Can he possibly die? Anything that dies has had some kind of aim in life, some kind of activity, which has worn out; but that does not apply to Odradek. Am I to suppose, then, that he will always be rolling down the stairs, with ends of thread trailing after him, right before the feet of my children, and my children’s children? He does no harm to anyone that one can see; but the idea that he is likely to survive me I find almost painful.

[Vergeblich frage ich mich, was mit ihm geschehen wird. Kann er denn sterben? Alles, was stirbt, hat vorher eine Art Ziel, eine Art Tätigkeit gehabt und daran hat es sich gerieben; das trifft bei Odradek nicht zu. Sollte er also einstmals etwa noch vor den Füßen meiner Kinder und Kindeskinder mit nachschleifendem Zwirnsfaden die Treppe hinunterkollern? Er schadet ja offenbar niemandem; aber die Vorstellung, daß er mich auch noch überleben sollte, ist mir eine fast schmerzliche.]

Perhaps the most famous example of Kafkaesque decline is Gregor Samsa’s turn from an upright-walking Luftmensch to a lowly bug in “The Metamorphosis” (first translated perspective, “The three worst themes in many interpretations of Kafka are the transcendence of the law, the interiority of guilt, the subjectivity of enunciation. They are connected to all the stupidities that have been written about allegory, metaphor, and symbolism in Kafka.” See Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix. Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 45. This curiously reactionary argument seems to contradict their otherwise apparent interest in what they call “lines of flight” or “lines of escape,” obvious metaphors for the desire for transcendence in their own right. Furthermore, by romanticizing Kafka as a symbol of the “minority” or “nomad,” their theory of deterritorialization and desire risks fetishizing or reifying his works instead of recognizing their irony. Furthermore, by romanticizing Kafka as a symbol of the “minority” or “nomad,” their theory of deterritorialization and desire risks fetishizing or reifying his works instead of recognizing their irony.


94 This critique was written in 1943, and comes after the following lines: “What is this new technique? ‘It’s Kafka written by Hemingway,’ I was told. I confess that I have found no trace of Kafka in it.” Sartre, Jean-Paul. “Camus’s The Outsider,” in Literary and Philosophical Essays of Jean-Paul Sartre, trans. Annette Michelson (New York: Criterion Books, 1955), 115-116. Of course Camus did develop his own philosophy of transcendence, especially in later writings like The Rebel, although he never entertained the same kind of tragicomic irony that characterizes the Kafkaesque.


96 Günther Anders was early in recognizing the significance of this figure in Kafka’s fiction: “Because Gregor Samsa wishes to live as an artist (i.e. ‘free as air’ [wie ein Luftmensch]), he is considered in the eyes of the
into English by Eugene Jolas for publication in *transition*). Although Gregor is able to climb the walls and hang from the ceiling in his new body, the story represents his dehumanization and death mainly as a corporeal degeneration to the level of the horizontal: it begins with his difficulty lifting his heavy body out of bed and standing on his many new feet, follows him as he crawls about his room and eats his meals straight off the floor, and represents his eventual death occurring as “his head sank to the floor of its own accord.” When his body is finally discovered, it is described as “completely flat and dry, as could only now be seen when it was no longer supported by the legs” (*vollständig flach und trocken, man erkannte das eigentlich erst jetzt, da er nicht mehr von den Beinchen gehoben war*). Remarkably, this description of corporeal flatness bears close resemblance to Kafka’s fantasy of himself as a failed writer in a letter he sent to Felice Bauer during the same month that he wrote his most famous story: “When I didn’t write, I was at once flat on the floor, fit for the dustbin.”

While Gregor does in fact get thrown out of his household like refuse, the even more lowly, mole-like creature in “The Burrow” (*Der Bau*) manages to survive in his absurd state of abjection by digging his habitat entirely underground. This late story could be read as an ironic literalization of spatial metaphors of melancholic depression, and may well have been indebted to Kafka’s reading of Dostoyevsky’s novella *Notes From Underground* (also an important source for the spatial representation of racial melancholy in Richard Wright’s story “The Man Who Lived Underground” and Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man*). The theme of subterranean construction also appears in Kafka’s story “A Visit to a Mine” (*Ein Besuch im Bergwerk*), which focuses on the various ranks of workers in a mineshaft. Along with “The Burrow,” this fantasy of digging underground was presumably related to Kafka’s day job at the Workmen’s Accident Insurance, for which one of his most significant reports was on “Accident Prevention in Quarries.”

At least as significant as the idea of descent in Kafka’s writing is the post-romantic idea of aspiration as a struggle to ascend. Perhaps the most obvious example is the land surveyor’s struggle to reach the towering medieval fortress on the hill in *The Castle* [Das respektabler, down-to-earth world, to be a ‘bit of an insect’; thus, in *The Metamorphosis*, he wakes up as a beetle, whose idea of happiness is to be clinging to the ceiling.” Anders, Günter. *Franz Kafka*, trans A. Steter and A.K. Thorlby (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1960), 43. More on this in my discussion of Kafka’s “Luftmenschen” later in this chapter, and in my discussion of Saul Bellow’s *Dangling Man* and Thomas Pynchon’s *V.* in my chapter “Vertical Wandering.” For an extensive discussion of the *Luftmenschen* figure in Jewish and German history and literature, see Berg, Nicolas. *Luftmenschen. Zur Geschichte einer Metapher* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008).

97 *Transition*, No. 26 (Winter, 1937)
98 Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, 135. This follows immediately after the ringing of the bells of the clock tower, highlighting the fact that the world continues to move upward and onward despite the fact that he has reached his final low point: “In this state of vacant and peaceful meditation he remained until the tower clock struck three in the morning.”
100 *The Basic Kafka*, 275. This letter is dated November 1, 1912; “The Metamorphosis” was written in the course of that same month, and published exactly three years later in November, 1915.
101 Ten years before completing this story, Kafka wrote in his diary on December 14, 1913: “Now read in Dostoyevsky the passage that reminds me so of my ‘being unhappy.’” [Jetzt bei Dostojewski die Stille gelesen, die so an mein ‘Unglücklichsein’ erinnern]. Kafka, Diaries, 248
Bataille compares this vertical figure to the Nietzschean idea of the summit as follows: “Like Kafka’s castle, in the final analysis the summit is simply whatever is inaccessible. It slips away from us, at least until we stop being human, that is, until we stop speaking.”¹⁰³ Yet Kafka’s motif of the summit may be traced back not only to Nietzsche, but also to Kierkegaard. It appears early on in his first major work of fiction, “Description of a Struggle” [Beschreibung eines Kampfes], which follows the exploits of a young man climbing up the side of the Laurenzberg in Prague in addition to travelling on the back of his newfound acquaintance like a knight on a horse. But its allegorical significance is addressed even more pointedly in his diary entry of August 6, 1914:

It is thus that I waver, continually fly to the summit of the mountain, but then fall back in a moment. Others waver too, but in lower regions, with greater strength; if they are in danger of falling, they are caught up by the kinsmea who walks beside them for that very purpose. But I waver on the heights; it is not death, alas, but the eternal torments of the dying.¹⁰⁴

[So schwanke ich also, fliege unaufhörlich zur Spitze des Berges, kann mich aber kaum einen Augenblick oben erhalten. Andere schwanken auch, aber in untern Gegenden, mit stärkeren Kräften; drohen sie zu fallen, so fängt sie der Verwandte auf, der zu diesem Zweck neben ihnen geht. Ich aber schwanke dort oben, es ist leider kein Tod, aber die ewigen Qualen des Sterbens.]

Compare this to Nietzsche’s representation of the mountaintop in the section of Thus Spoke Zarathustra called “On Reading and Writing” (published in German the same year that Kafka was born):

I no longer feel as you do: this cloud which I see under me, this blackness and heaviness at which I laugh – precisely this is your thunder-cloud.

You look up when you desire to be exalted. And I look down, because I am exalted.

Who among you can at the same time laugh and be exalted?

He who climbs upon the highest mountains laughs at all tragedies, real or imaginary.

Untroubled, scornful, outrageous – that is how wisdom wants us to be: she is a woman and never loves anyone but a warrior.

You tell me: “Life is hard to bear.” But if it were otherwise why should you have your pride in the morning and your resignation in the evening?


¹⁰⁴ Kafka, Diaries, 302
Life is hard to bear: but do not pretend to be so tender! We are all of us pretty fine asses and assesses of burden!\textsuperscript{103}

While Kafka claims to have reached much the same metaphysical height as Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, he obviously doesn’t find it quite so easy to laugh off tragedies and burdens, is not nearly so “untroubled, scornful, outrageous,” and does not feel in any way exalted. Instead of looking down from the summit of the mountain with boldness and power, he pictures himself “wavered,” repeatedly flying up and falling back down again in an absurd struggle against the inevitability of death.

Given that Kafka generally represents himself as more of a \textit{Luftmensch} than an \textit{Übermensch}, his meditations on flying and falling arguably derived above all from his reading of Kierkegaard’s \textit{Fear and Trembling},\textsuperscript{106} in which the Danish philosopher defines the “knights of infinity” as those who “make the upward movement and fall down again.” Although Kierkegaard calls these heroic figures ethical and elevated, he argues that they are nonetheless doomed to vacillation because they remain torn between aesthetic desire and the religious “leap of faith.” By contrast, the “knights of faith” are those who are able to rise to the greatest heights by harnessing the same “strength of the absurd” that Abraham realized in his Biblical test before God.\textsuperscript{107} In turn, by rethinking Hegel’s concept of dialectical \textit{Aufhebung}, Kierkegaard argues that it is only the “leap of faith” that is able to overcome this anxiety of the absurd. According to this strict hierarchy of values, the “knights of infinity” depend on the noble, mediating force of ethics in order to rise above the lowly realm of the aesthetic, but can only achieve the transcendent heights of faith through an even higher leap into the realm of religion: “Faith is therefore no aesthetic emotion,” he concludes, “but something higher, exactly because it presupposes resignation; it is not the immediate inclination of the heart but the paradox of existence.”\textsuperscript{108}

Kafka evidently struggled with this privileging of religion over art, a traditional opposition in European culture that dates back to the Platonic ban on mimesis and the Biblical prohibition against “graven images.” In turn, he obviously sought solace in spiritual ideas of “height” and “depth” as a means to overcome existential uncertainty. In a letter to Felice Bauer, for instance, he refers to these spatial metaphors of transcendence and immanence in considering how to avoid becoming like “a lost dog” or a pathetic figure falling down a staircase – in other words, like a character in one of his stories:

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\textsuperscript{103} Nietzsche, 68
\textsuperscript{106} “Kierkegaard is a star shining over a region almost inaccessible to me,” Kafka wrote in a letter to Oskar Baum. “I am glad you will read him. I know only \textit{Fear and Trembling}.” Quoted in Wahl, 268
\textsuperscript{107} Similarly, in \textit{The Concept of Anxiety}, Kierkegaard defines \textit{angst} as “the dizziness of freedom” by comparing it to the vertigo experienced in looking downward from a position of height: “Anxiety may be compared with dizziness. He whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. But what is the reason for this? It is just as much in his eyes as in the abyss, for suppose he had not looked down. Hence is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis and freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying bold finiteness to support itself. Freedom succumbs in this dizziness.” For more on this idea in Kierkegaard’s philosophy, see Hoberman, John M. “Kierkegaard on Vertigo,” in \textit{International Kierkegaard Commentary: Sickness Unto Death}, Robert L. Perkins, ed. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2003).
\textsuperscript{108} Kierkegaard, \textit{Fear and Trembling}, 76
Do you feel – this is the main thing – unbroken connections between yourself and some reassuringly remote, possibly infinite, height or depth? [Fühlst Du – was die Hauptsache ist – ununterbrochene Beziehungen zwischen Dir und einer beruhigend fernen, womöglich unendlichen Höhe oder Tiefe?] Anyone who constantly feels that does not have to run around like a dog, a lost dog, looking around beseechingly but mutely, he need not feel the desire to slip into the grace as though it were a warm sleeping bag and life a cold winter night, and when he climbs the stairs to his office, he does not have to think he sees himself simultaneously falling from above down the entire staircase, shimmering in the uncertain light, revolving with the rapidity of his motion, shaking his head with impatience.  

Although Kafka was obviously impressed by Kierkegaard’s Christian commitment to vertical transcendence, it is clear that he also rejected key aspects of both his religion and his philosophy. Concluding his discussion of the story of Abraham in his “Meditations,” he refers to Kierkegaard if not by name than by implication:

VII. His argumentation is accompanied by a magic spell. From an argumentation one can escape into the world of magic, form a magic spell into the world of logic; but both together oppress, because then they have become something else, living magic or a not destructive, but constructive, destruction of the world.

VIII. He is too brilliant, with his brilliant intelligence he rides over the earth as if he were in a magic carriage, even there where there are no roads. This way his humble request to follow [Christ] becomes tyrannical, and his honest conviction to be ‘on the way’ becomes presumptuous.  

Kafka’s suspicion of the “magic spell” of religious philosophy also appears very much like his critique of poetic “virtuosity” as a conjuring trick in his response to Apollinaire. Despite his profound interest in both the Danish philosophy and the French poet, he obviously rejected their appeals to religious salvation. In turn, while he admitted true despair in his reflections on wavering, other personal writings reveal his firm faith in art for art’s sake. For instance, in his later diary entry of January, 1922, he suggested that it is writing that involves a “leap” into a higher realm (“out of the ranks of murderers,” as he curiously puts it), one which follows its own laws of ascensional movement rather than those of any religious faith or doctrine:


110 Quoted in Wahl, 263. According to Wahl, who defines Kierkegaard’s philosophy as one that “indicates to us the transcendental, the region without roads,” these lines may be interpreted as follows: “But how does he [Kierkegaard] know that there are no roads? He is obliged to rely upon authority, an authority to which he listens, and which he takes upon himself. From then on, instead of humbly begging his brethren to follow Christ, he assumes nolens volens the part of a tyrannical and presumptuous guide. Kierkegaard has some resemblance to the doorkeeper of The Trial, who inclines toward vanity and arrogance.” Wahl, 266-7
The consolation of writing, remarkable, mysterious, perhaps dangerous, perhaps salutary; it is to leap out of the ranks of murderers; it is an observation which is an act [Tat-Beobachtung]. There is an observation-act to the extent that a higher sort of observation is created — higher, not more acute, and the higher it is, the more inaccessible it is to the rank and file (of murderers), the less it is dependent, the more it follows the laws proper to its own movement, the more its road climbs, joyfully, incalculably.\footnote{111 Quoted in Blanchot, 7}

Kafka also questioned this motif of aesthetic ascension, however, especially with regard to the Yiddish figure of the Luftmenschen, or, in German, Luftmensch. As Mark Anderson has noted: “Kafka, following his encounter with the Luftmensch of the Yiddish theatre, takes the term literally, depicting the artist as a ‘groundless’ being, often an animal rather than a human being, who hovers in the air. His aerial ascension is proof not of artistic discipline and purity, but of social and ethical senselessness.” This embodied metaphor is most apparent in “Investigations of a Dog” [Forschungen eines Hunde], in which the narrator refers to the artful species of soaring dogs as “Lufthunde.” Because he aspires to the “ladder of science” [Stufe der Wissenschaft] in order to rise above his animal instincts, much as Francis Bacon appealed to the scientific method of induction a “ladder of intellect,”\footnote{112 Bacon’s metaphor is in turn comparable to Aristotle’s idea of the ladder of life or scala naturae as well as the Christian image of the “great chain of being,” which I consider in my discussion of Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus below.} this canine critic has difficulty appreciating the Lufthunde as worthy of respect or admiration. Instead he regards them as absurd artist types with an “artificial, immature, over-attentive, well-groomed look” [Anschein nach ein künstliches, unreifes, übersorgfältig frisiertes Gebilde] and a lack of social responsibility: “They have no relation whatever to the general life of the community, they hover in the air, and that is all, and life goes on its usual way; someone now and then refers to art and artists, but there it ends.” [Im allgemeinen wird sie gar nicht begründet, sie schweben in der Luft, und dabei bleibt es, das Leben geht weiter seinen Gang, bis und da spricht man von Kunst und Künstlern, das ist alles.]\footnote{113 Kafka, The Complete Stories, 294. According to Anderson, the prevalence of gymnastic creatures in Kafka’s fiction, including the ape in “Report to an Academy,” the trapeze artist in “First Sorrow,” the equestrienne or Kunstreiterin in “Up in the Gallery,” and Grete’s final stretching at the end of “The Metamorphosis,” may be related to Kafka’s own practice of calisthenic exercises developed by the Danish gymnast and pedagogue J.P. Müller. See esp. Anderson, 79.}

Thus while community is thus represented according to the horizontal axis, freedom is defined specifically in terms of vertical transcendence; as the narrator concludes, his basic instinct is to always to “prize freedom higher than everything else.”\footnote{114 Kafka, The Complete Stories, 316} This principle of freedom is not necessarily pure, however, as it is often enabled by or enabling of transgression and sin. For instance, toward the beginning of the story the narrator describes the dogs who stand on their hind legs as doing so “as if Nature were in error” [als sie die Natur in Fehler], as if it was not only an exceptional form of walking, but in fact “a sin” [vielleicht gingen sie wirklich ausnahmsweise nur auf ihnen, es ist eine Sünde, wohlf]. Thus he is
ultimately confronted with the comic irony of the absurd: “Is the world standing on its head?” [War die Welt verkehrt?]. Later in the story, he entertains the voice of an imaginary critic, who suggests that instead of persisting in silence, the dog’s knowledge should be spoken aloud in public, after which

…the great choir of dogdom will join in as if it had been waiting for you. Then you will have clarity, truth, avowal, as much of them as you desire. The roof of this wretched life, of which you say so many hard things, will burst open, and all of us, shoulder to shoulder, will ascend into the lofty realm of freedom [aufsteigen in die hohe Freiheit].

Here we see transcendence represented as a vertical ascent through the “roof of this wretched life” into the “lofty realm of freedom.” Rather than individuals simply leaping or floating about like the Luftbünde, this progressive (if ironic) ascension involves a communal voice or “choir of dogdom” joining together in the shared desire for truth and freedom.

“Investigations of a Dog” was written in 1922, the same year as “A Hunger Artist” [Ein Hungerkünstler], and in fact both stories revolve around protagonists who decide to fast for the sake of a higher purpose. Although the narrator admits his “thirst for knowledge,” he also realizes his instinctive desire for freedom through fasting rather than through “upward incantations” to attract food from a divine power, scientific investigation to discover truths about nature, or artistic leaps into the air. In his words: “the way goes through fasting; the highest, if it is attainable, is attainable only by the highest effort, and the highest effort among us is voluntary fasting.”

Similarly, the hunger artist’s performance of fasting may also be interpreted as a kind of trial of self-transcendence:

True, he would entrust his bony arms to the outstretched helping hands of the ladies bending over him, but stand up he would not…Why should he be cheated out of the fame he would get for fasting longer, for being not only the record hunger artist of all time, which presumably he was already, but for beating his own record by a performance beyond human imagination, since he felt that there were no limits to his capacity for fasting?

And yet, ironically, this desire to metaphorically strive higher is also what keeps the hunger artist from literally standing up on his own two legs, and what ultimately brings him down to the level of the ground and closer to death, as later we read: “His legs in a spasm of self-preservation clung close to each other at the knees, yet scraped on the ground as if it were not really solid ground, as if they were only trying to find solid ground.” For the

115 Kafka, The Complete Stories, 284-5
116 Kafka, The Complete Stories, 290
117 Kafka, The Complete Stories, 289
118 Kafka, The Complete Stories, 304
119 Kafka, The Complete Stories, 309
120 Kafka, The Basic Kafka, 83
121 Kafka, The Basic Kafka, 84
hunger artist’s ability to transcend himself depends not only on aspirational desire but also rigorous denial; for example, in response to his boast that he could fast for much longer, the impresario “praised the high ambition, the good will, the great self-denial implicit in such a statement.” In this way the hunger artist appears as a kind of martyr figure, albeit a strangely ironic one who is met with indifference from his audience:

The impresario came forward, without a word, – for the band made speech impossible – lifted his arms in the air above the artist, as if inviting Heaven to look down upon its creature here in the straw, this suffering martyr, which indeed he was, although in quite another sense.

In his diary entry of January 3, 1912, Kafka describes his own experience of abandoning food and drink – as well as other pleasures of sex, philosophy and music – while devoting himself to writing. Having “thinned out in all those directions,” he realizes that his “organism” has ultimately found its “richest direction” by devoting itself to the practice of writing:

When my organism realized that writing was the richest direction of my being, everything pointed itself that way, and all other capacities, those which had as objects the pleasures of sex, drink, food, philosophical meditation and especially music, were abandoned. I’ve thinned out in all those directions. This was necessary, because my strength, even when gathered all together and devoted to one aim, was so small that it could only half reach the goal of writing….I will now have only to reject work at the office – my development being complete and I myself having nothing more to sacrifice as far as I can see – to begin my real life…in the course of which my face will finally be able to grow old in a natural way according to the progress of my effort.

Despite these pretensions to a more ascetic lifestyle, Kafka did not quit his job at the office, and his growth in literary productivity in fact coincided with his burgeoning relationship with and eventual engagement to Felice Bauer. That said, he ultimately did break off his engagement, a decision that further enabled his identification with Kierkegaard, who cancelled his engagement to his fiancée, Regine Olsen, in order to devote himself to writing. Yet while Kierkegaard justified his commitment to philosophical writing by appealing to the principle of religious faith, Kafka turned his back on religion along with marriage, and devoted himself to writing for the sake of writing.

Thus instead of appealing to ascetic denial or religious faith, Kafka ultimately found strength in aspiration itself. This is perhaps most evident in “The Bucket Rider,” which

122 Kafka, *The Basic Kafka*, 85
123 Quoted in Blanchot, 65
124 When he was considering ending his engagement, Kafka wrote of Kierkegaard: “As I suspected, his case, despite essential differences, is very similar to mine, at least he is on the same side of the world. He bears me out like a friend.” And as Richard Sheppard notes, Kafka compared himself to Kierkegaard in many other ways as well, claiming that both suffered from “massive melancholy” caused by a “tyrannical father,” and that they even shared a certain physical resemblance. See Sheppard, 277-8.
introduces us to a character who is suffering in the winter because he does not have enough money to buy coal. Here the aesthetics of aspiration is inflected with class consciousness and material lack is literally transformed into levity: because his bucket is so empty for lack of coal, it manages to actually float in the air, and so its owner, instead of resigning himself to his alienated existence, decides to fly over the city to ask the coal dealer directly for support. In riding his bucket like a horse, he recalls the comic hero in “Description of a Struggle” and the female equestrienne in “Up in the Gallery,” and in beginning his journey by heading down the stairs of his house, he is similar to Odradek in “Cares of a Family Man.” And when he then actually takes off into the sky, he ultimately appears like the Lufthunde in “Investigations of a Dog,” except unlike those mercurial creatures, his flight is decidedly assertive:

> My mode of arrival must decide the matter; so I ride off on the bucket…once downstairs my bucket ascends, superbly, superbly; camels humbly sitting on the ground do not rise with more dignity, shaking themselves under the sticks of their drivers. Through the hard-frozen streets we go at a regular canter; often I am upraised as high as the first storey of a house; never do I sink as low as the house doors. And at last I float at an extraordinary height above the vaulted cellar of the dealer, whom I see far below crouching over his table, where he is writing.125

While the bucket rider is freezing from lack of coal, this rich businessman is depicted as having too much, and in turn ends up wasting what he has: “he has opened the door to let out the excessive heat.” Begging the dealer and his wife for a loan, the rider promises he will pay them back at some point, just “not now.” He then reflects on these words in his head with growing despair, associating them with the “external clock” of the church bells: “What a knell-like sound the words ‘not just now’ have, and how bewilderingly they mingle with the evening chimes that fall from the church steeple nearby!”126 Unfortunately, the rider gets nowhere with his pleas because, strangely, neither the coal dealer nor his wife can see him, suggesting that he may only exist at this point according to his own “internal clock,” or that he has already departed into an alternative afterlife. Because he is “too light” on his bucket, the coal dealer’s wife is able to send him away with just a shake of her apron: “My bucket has all the virtues of a good steed except powers of resistance, which it has not; it is too light; a woman’s apron can make it fly through the air.”127 In the end, he simply flies off into the “frozen mountains” instead, leaving us to ponder the irony of the fact that he has taken flight into the very cold that he had originally hoped to escape.

125 Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, 413
126 Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, 414
127 Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, 414
Modernism, Aviation and Mrs. Dalloway

Kafka published his journalistic essay “The Airplanes at Brescia” in the Prague newspaper Bohemia less than a month after he attended the international air show that took place at the northern Italian city in early September of 1909. To some extent his essay romanticizes the spectacular gymnastic flights of the planes, as when he describes the path of the French aviator Rougier as his plane “ascends in small circles, flies over Blériot, turns him into a spectator and never stops climbing upward.” But for the most part he dwells on the analogy between the losing pilot and the struggling writer, focusing with sardonic wit on failed trial flights, Blériot’s many futile attempts to start his engine before finally making it into the air, and Rougier’s eventual loss to the American Glenn Curtiss while sitting “at his control board like a writer at his desk.”

In contrast to Kafka’s essay, which mocks the competition with light-hearted irony, the burgeoning Italian Futurists were won over by the air show at Brescia: Gabriele D’Annunzio in fact performed an eight-minute flight of his own, and F.T. Marinetti came away with a surge of newfound inspiration for his own radical vision of aesthetic and political ascent. As Jeffrey Schnapp shows in his article “Propeller Talk,” Marinetti’s visit to Brescia had a major effect on the proto-fascist poetics that he had already begun to develop in The Conquest of the Stars (1902), Mafarka the Futurist (1909) and his futurist manifesto of the same year, and it ultimately drove him to develop his most significant “Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature” in 1912. This was two years after he managed to make his own flight in an airplane, after which he recalled: "Increasing weightlessness. An infinite sense of voluptuousness. You descend from the machine with a light and elastic jump. You have removed a weight from your back. You have triumphed over the stickiness of the road. You have triumphed over the law that forces man to crawl."129

One of the most prominent critics of Marinetti in particular and Futurism in general was of course Apollinaire, and in his 1918 lecture “The New Spirit and the Poets,” L’esprit nouveau et les poètes, he also confronted the growing influence of the airplane on the poetic imagination: “Insofar as airplanes did not fill the sky, the fable of Icarus was only a supposed truth. Today, it is no longer a fable.”130 By comparing the invention of the airplane to the story of Icarus, as he has already done in “Zone,” Apollinaire’s implication here is that the twentieth-century pilot was not only a role model for aspirational or ascensional fantasy, but also a symbol for the naïveté and hubris of the modern artist.

Of course this was a problem that James Joyce wrestled with in the guise of his ironic hero Stephen Dedalus, as I shall discuss later. But a number of other “high modernist” writers also reflected on the figure of the airplane directly in the years following World War II, and according to Robert Wohl’s two-volume historical study, Aviation and the

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130 Apollinaire, Guillaume. Selected Writings of Guillaume Apollinaire (New York: New Directions), 233. [Tant que les avions ne peuplaient pas le ciel, la fable d’Icare n’était qu’une vérité supposée. Aujourd’hui ce n’est plus une fable.]
Western Imagination, the development of the airplane played a central role in the rise of the twentieth century in general. Despite the damage caused by air power during World War I, Wohl argues, the image of the airplane in flight mainly “inspired a sense of wonder, awe and pride” among Europeans and Americans in the first half of the twentieth century.131

A great example of this wonder, awe and pride concerning the airplane may be found in Marcel Proust’s Recherche, as Sara Danius shows in her insightful study The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception and Aesthetics.132 Here we find Proust’s narrator arrested on his horse by a strange sound in the sky unlike any he had ever heard before. Raising his “tear-filled eyes in the direction from which the sound seemed to come,” he eventually realizes that he has discovered an airplane in flight for the first time in his life:

I saw not two hundred feet above my head, against the sun, between two great wings of flashing metal which were bearing him aloft, a creature whose indistinct face appeared to me to resemble that of a man. I was as deeply moved as an ancient Greek on seeing for the first time a demi-god. I wept – for I had been ready to weep the moment I realized that the sound came from above my head (aeroplanes were still rare in those days), at the thought that what I was going to see for the first time was an aeroplane.

Feeling like “an ancient Greek” before a demi-God, Proust’s narrator is overcome with emotion not only by the sound and image of the plane itself, but simply by the recognition of its very existence. The pilot, in turn, appears to him completely unbounded, free not only from the laws of gravity, but from “life itself”:

I felt there lay open before him – before me, had not habit made me a prisoner – all the routes in space, in life itself; he flew on, let himself glide for a few moments over the sea, then quickly making up his mind, seeming to yield to some attraction that was the reverse of gravity, as though returning to his native element, with a slight adjustment of his golden wings he headed straight up into the sky.133

Yet perhaps the most famous modernist depiction of this sensation is the scene toward the beginning of Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway, in which a crowd of pedestrians looks up to gaze at a skywriting airplane. Before the plane appears in the sky, however, the crowd stops in their tracks to wait for a motor car to pass by. Although they remain unsure who is in the car – is it the Queen or the Prime Minister? – nonetheless, “rumours were at

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once in circulation from the middle of Bond Street to Oxford Street on one side, to
Atkinson’s scent shop on the other, passing invisibly, like a cloud, swift, veil-like…”

Just as Woolf’s free indirect discourse and stream-of-consciousness narration flow
across the page, the circulation of discourse among her various characters appears as a kind
of horizontal flow in the metropolitan streetscape. Indeed, after the car has gone, we read
that, “it left a slight ripple which flowed through glove shops and hat shops and tailor’s
shops on both sides of Bond Street.” What is especially remarkable about this flow of
signifiers and sentiments is that it is not only located in the urban space of London, or the
national space of Britain, but in a kind of global space of circulation and Empire:

For in all the hat shops and tailors’ shops strangers looked at each other and
thought of the dead; of the flag; of Empire. In a public house in a back street
a Colonial insulted the House of Windsor, which led to words, broken beer
glasses, and a general shindy, which echoed strangely across the way in the
ears of girls buying white underlinen threaded with pure white ribbon for
their weddings. For the surface agitation of the passing car as it sunk grazed
something very profound.

Thus Woolf shows us that the apparent “surface agitation” of urban experience is
always accompanied by something more hidden and “profound.” Similarly, we might argue
that, along with what Manuel Castells has called the “space of flows,” it is important to
account for the hierarchical topographies of stratification in urban space, whether of power
and conflict or, as T.S. Eliot famously put it in The Wasteland, of “memory and desire.”

The verticality of Woolf’s globalizing streetscape becomes even more pronounced
when the spectators turn their heads to gaze up at an airplane flying in the sky over the city:

Suddenly Mrs. Coates looked up into the sky. The sound of an aeroplane
bored ominously into the ears of the crowd. There it was coming over the
trees, letting out white smoke from behind, which curled and twisted, actually
writing something! making letters in the sky! Every one looked up.

Dropping dead down the aeroplane soared straight up, curved in a
loop, raced, sank, rose, and whatever it did, wherever it went, out fluttered
behind it a think ruffled bar of white smoke which curled and wreathed upon
the sky in letters. But what letters? A C was it? An E, then an L? Only for a
moment did they lie still; then they moved and melted and were rubbed out
up in the sky, and the aeroplane shot further away and again, in a fresh space
of sky, began writing a K, an E, a Y, perhaps?

Here the comparison between the pilot and the writer is no longer simply a
metaphorical analogy, as it was for Kafka, Marinetti and Apollinaire, as this plane is

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135 Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*, 17
136 Woolf, Virginia, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 18
in fact literally writing words in the sky.\textsuperscript{138} The scene is based on an actual event, the first historical demonstration of skywriting, which occurred on Derby Day at Epsom Downs in May 1922, six months before Woolf began writing her novel.\textsuperscript{139} The \textit{Daily Mail} called the spectacle “the greatest single development of outdoor advertising,” and as Michael North notes in his book \textit{Reading 1922}, the airplanes in fact aimed to spell the words “Daily Mail” in order to advertize the newspaper. According to North:

Not only does Woolf erase the \textit{Daily Mail} from the site of its great triumph, but she also demolishes the unanimity and simultaneity on which skywriting staked out its extravagant claims. What we see in Woolf’s account is the ineluctable subjectivity and idiosyncrasy of the individual, for whom even the most public language can have a purely personal significance.\textsuperscript{140}

During Woolf’s time, the \textit{Daily Mail} was known as right-wing, nationalist broadsheet with imperialist leanings; having been accused of warmongering during World War I, it later developed a pro-fascist bent under the editorship of Lord Rothermere, who became friendly with both Mussolini and Hitler in the early 1930s.\textsuperscript{141} In Woolf’s version of the event, the spectators never recognize what the words are supposed to spell, and instead come up with such divergent possibilities as “Glaxo,” “Kreem” and “Toffee.” By suggesting that the performative advertising campaign was a comic failure, Woolf seems to be mocking the right-wing paper’s attempt to take the urban crowd out of the heterogeneity and heteroglossia of the street and into its imagined community of nationalist readers.\textsuperscript{142} Although the event may have succeeded in bringing the urban spectators together through a common simultaneous experience, Woolf represents the newspaper as failing to communicate its basic message either to them or to the readers of her novel. And so in many ways

\textsuperscript{138} For an important essay on the relationship between the airplane and British nationality in Woolf’s fiction, see Gillian Beer’s “The Island and the Aeroplane: The Case of Virginia Woolf” in Bhabha, Homi, ed. \textit{Nation and Narration} (New York: Routledge, 1990)

\textsuperscript{139} According to the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum: “Skywriting, defined as the process of writing a name or message with smoke from an aircraft against a blue sky, began in England after World War I, the brainchild of Major John C. Savage, RAF. His first successful demonstration was at the Derby at Epsom Downs, in May 1922, when Captain Cyril Turner wrote "Daily Mail" above the track. Turner then came to the United States in October 1922 and wrote "Hello U.S.A." above New York City.”

http://www.nasm.si.edu/collections/artifact.cfm?id=A20010091000

\textsuperscript{140} North, Michael. \textit{Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 83.


\textsuperscript{142} According to North: “Not only does Woolf erase the \textit{Daily Mail} from the site of its great triumph, but she also demolishes the unanimity and simultaneity on which skywriting staked out its extravagant claims. What we see in Woolf’s account is the ineluctable subjectivity and idiosyncrasy of the individual, for whom even the most public language can have a purely personal significance.” North, Michael. \textit{Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 83.
her account of the promises of aviation are more akin to Kafka’s modernist irony than Marinetti’s avant-garde radicalism. Only much later would the destructive potential of this new technology also become clear, as Woolf would emphasize above all in her 1940 essay “Thoughts on Peace During an Air Raid.”

There is nonetheless little doubt that this air show was enchanting for the spectators on the ground; temporarily shocked out of the “blasé attitude” that Georg Simmel saw as the typical syndrome of urban living in his essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” they are left unable to continue going about their everyday routines and ultimately turn to fantasy instead. Floating from one daydream to the next, from Mrs. Coates to Mrs. Dempster to Mr. Bentley, we read:

Ah, but that aeroplane! Hadn’t Mrs. Dempster always longed to see foreign parts? She had a nephew, a missionary. It soared and shot. She always went on the sea at Margate, not out o’ sight of land, but she had no patience with women who were afraid of water. It swept and fell. Her stomach was in her mouth. Up again. There’s a fine young feller aboard of it, Mrs. Dempster wagered, and away and away it went, fast and fading, away and away the aeroplane shot; soaring over Greenwich and all the masts; over the little island of grey churched, St. Paul’s and the rest till, on either side of London, fields spread out and dark brown woods where adventurous thrushes hopping boldly, glancing quickly, snatched the snail and tapped him on a stone, once, twice, thrice.

Away and away the aeroplane shot, till it was nothing but a bright spark; an aspiration; a concentration; a symbol (so it seemed to Mr. Bentley, vigorously rolling his strip of turf at Greenwich) of man’s soul; of his determination, thought Mr. Bentley, sweeping round the cedar tree, to get outside his body, beyond his house, by means of thought, Einstein, speculation, mathematics, the Mendelian theory – away the aeroplane shot.

From this passage we may conclude that the airplane had become “an aspiration; a concentration; a symbol” not only for Mr. Bentley, but for the metropolitan modernist imagination at large. While for Mr. Bentley it represents a connection between the latest scientific advancements of Einstein and Mendel to the newfound potential of “man’s soul” to transcend the limits of the body and the household, for Mrs. Dempster it signifies the exciting possibility of travel to “foreign parts,” including the kinds of places where her missionary nephew might be (such as India, from where Peter Walsh has just returned). Both fantasies, including Mr. Bentley’s gesture to the cosmic realm of the spirit, suggest a distinctly secular orientation, especially as we are shown how the airplane overshadows both the “little island of churches” as well as St. Paul’s cathedral. That said, it does not seem to imply any kind of “disenchantment of the world,” which Max Weber attributed to the secularizing effects of scientific reason. Instead, Woolf’s scene appears to represent a new kind of aesthetic re-enchantment. While this modernist fascination with airplanes may be read

143 See introduction, note 7.
144 Woolf, 27-28
as a kind of technological fetishism, in the case of Woolf’s street-scene it also seems to represent a subtle satirical critique of commodity fetishism in the old-fashioned Marxist sense, since the event that was her model was actually a commercial advertising campaign. In turn, since the plane succeeded in diverting the crowd away from the patriotic automobile procession, the scene suggests that the vertical commercialization of air space was becoming a new challenge to the civic horizonality of the nation-state.

In his essay *One Way Street*, Benjamin suggests that the apparent verticalization of the printed word is also a result of its increasing subjection to the metropolitan economy. In his words:

Script – having found, in the book, a refuge in which it can lead an autonomous existence – is pitilessly dragged out into the street by advertisements and subjected to the brutal heteronomies of economic chaos. This is the hard schooling of its new form. If centuries ago it began gradually to lie down, passing from the upright position to the manuscript resting on sloping desks before finally taking itself to bed in the printed book, it now begins just as slowly to rise again from the ground. The newspaper is read more in the perpendicular than the horizontal, while film and advertisement force the printed word entirely into the dictatorial vertical [die diktatorische Vertikale].

Here Benjamin represents the technological development of mass media in public space as a vertical turn, and like Woolf he highlights the role of commercial advertising in particular. Although the newspaper may have been at the forefront of what Benedict Anderson has called “print capitalism,” Benjamin suggests here that it also paved the way for its own demise, as it was in fact the vertical broadsheet that initiated the gradual shift from the downward reading of manuscripts to the upward reading of signs in the streets and inter-titles in the film palaces. Likewise, Woolf’s re-imagining of the *Daily Mail* advertising stunt shows that the event of the skywriting airplane ultimately became far more significant to the spectators down below than the commodity it was supposed to sell (or the event of Derby Day, which provided the occasion for the spectacle in the first place). In this way, her scene may be read as a mockery of the potential for print capitalism to retain the national communities it had originally helped to write into existence.

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Stephen Dedalus and the Modernization of Ascension

James Joyce signed the name “Stephen Daedalus” to his autobiographical paper "A Portrait of the Artist" on January 7, 1904, which, as Hugh Kenner has observed, was exactly three weeks after the Wright Brothers launched their famous flight at Kitty Hawk on December 17, 1903. Although Kenner does not elaborate on the connection, the implication of this connection is that Joyce's turn to the ancient Greek figure of artificial flight was either historically related to or directly inspired by the technological development of the airplane. It took another twelve years before Stephen Dedalus appeared in print as the protagonist of *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and then another five years before he returned in *Ulysses*. In both novels, he appears as an aspiring artist who struggles against the gravity of the ancients in order to take flight, and remain “in good stead,” in the world of the modern.

Like Apollinaire's Parisian wanderer, Joyce's Irish artist-hero is deeply schooled in Catholic thought, especially the rhetoric and poetics of ascension and downfall. Yet he is also born with an obvious connection to ancient Greece, and ends up developing a growing suspicion of Christian doctrine and a burgeoning interest in mythology and philosophy instead. In addition to his classical bent, he develops a certain affinity for modern Germanic thought, especially the aesthetics of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, the mysticism of Cornelius Agrippa and Emanuel Swedenborg, and, as hinted at a few times in *Ulysses*, the romantic neo-paganism of Friedrich Nietzsche.

Horizontal wandering, vertical ascension and transcendence, the weight of the past, and the fear of downfall are central concerns in both *Portrait* and *Ulysses*. For Stephen Dedalus, they constitute a dialectical struggle between the desire for transcendence, as represented by his classical surname and his religious upbringing, and the potential for catastrophe, which remains apparent in his Icarian immaturity and hubris. Both are in turn related to the classical tension between *chronos* or chronological time and *kairós* or crisis-time, and the latter is particularly tied up in his distinctly Christian anxieties about downfall in particular, as represented by Lucifer, the fallen angel, and Adam, the fallen man. Still aspiring to aesthetic achievement at the end of *Portrait*, Stephen re-appears as the Telemachus figure in *Ulysses* already perched in the heights of the Martello Tower. Later, down in the streets of Dublin, he finds himself adopting an alternative father figure in the guise of Leopold Bloom. As Telemachus and Odysseus rather than Icarus and Dedalus, these otherwise disparate urban wanderers ultimately show how the aspiration to transcend the horizontal experience of everyday life need not only involve a neo-romantic aspiration to power, freedom, and transcendence, but may also open up new spaces of empathy, pluralism, and immanence.

Stephen first begins to resist his religious teachings in chapter three of *Portrait*, about halfway through the novel, where we find him expressing his newfound sense of self-destructive desire and pride. “What did it avail to pray when he knew that his soul lusted after its own destruction?” he asks in true Icarian, anti-Christian fashion. “His pride in his own sin, his loveless awe of God, told him that his offense was too grievous to be atoned for.

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in whole or in part by a false homage to the Allseeing and Allknowing.” Soon after, however, he joins a retreat in honor of Saint Francis Xavier, and his listlessness and despair are overcome by the fear of God as he listens to the preacher narrate how the Fall of Lucifer led to the Creation of Man:

Adam and Eve, my dear boys, were, as you know, our first parents and you will remember that they were created by God in order that the seats in heaven left vacant by the fall of Lucifer and his rebellious angels might be filled again. Lucifer, we are told, was a son of the morning, a radiant and mighty angel; yet he fell: he fell and there fell with him a third part of the host of heaven: he fell and was hurled with his rebellious angels into hell. What his sin was we cannot say. Theologians consider it was the sin of pride, the sinful thought conceived in an instant: *non serviam: I will not serve*. That instant was his ruin. He offended the majesty of God by the sinful thought of one instant and God cast him out of heaven into hell for ever.

This idea of Lucifer as a fallen angel has been traced back to Isaiah 14:12-15, in which the once-powerful King of Babylon is described as being cast down to Sheol, the earthly pit of the dead. Here, Isaiah promises that when the Israelites are freed, they will be able to taunt their oppressors by pointing to the image of the Morning Star, another name for the planet Venus, which rises at dawn as the brightest star but soon fades when the sun appears. After the Latin Vulgate translation, "lucifer qui mane oriebaris" (morning star that used to rise early), the word “lucifer” eventually came to be taken as a proper name for the devil Satan. And so in the King James version, the primary sourcebook for Stephen’s teachers, the story is rendered as follows:

How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High. Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit.

According to the dominant Christian interpretation of the book of Genesis, the serpent in the Garden of Eden was also an incarnation of Lucifer or Satan. And so this is why the Catholic preacher tells his pupils that the Fall of Adam and Eve took place because they succumbed to the devil instead of fulfilling God’s plan for them to ascend to heaven and take the place left vacant by Lucifer:

Alas, my dear boys, they too fell. The devil, once a shining angel, a son of the

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148 Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 126
morning, now a foul fiend, came in the shape of a serpent, the subtlest of all
the beasts of the field. He envied them. He, the fallen great one, could not
bear to think that man, a being of clay, should possess the inheritance which
he by his sin had forfeited for ever. He came to the woman, the weaker
vessel, and poured the poison of his eloquence into her ear, promising her –
O, the blasphemy of that promise! – that if she and Adam ate of the
forbidden fruit they would become as gods, nay as God Himself. Eve yielded
to the wiles of the archtempter. She ate the apple and gave it also to Adam
who had not the moral courage to resist her. The poison tongue of Satan had
done its work. They fell.’

In this way, the Christian metaphor of “falling” depends on a vertical
hierarchy of God up above in heaven, Man down below on earth, and Lucifer
further down in Hell. In turn, “sin” is ultimately related to the “lower instincts,” as
Stephen’s teacher suggests, as well as “base consent to the promptings of corrupt
nature, to that which is gross and beastlike...a turning away from the counsel of our
higher nature, from all that is pure and holy, from the Holy God Himself.”

Such western ideas about “the great chain of being” or *scala naturae* appear
not only in Judeo-Christian theology, but can be traced back to Aristotelian and
Platonic philosophy as well as numerous other ancient belief systems. As Jan Kott
has argued, this vertical cosmology, “topocosm” or “*axis mundi*” has persisted in
western culture in particular from ancient Greek and Judeo-Christian thought to
modern politics, sociology and psychology:

The opposition between above and below has passed from
cosmology and metaphysics into the language of sociology and
political rhetoric (upper, middle, and lower class), and into
psychology and psychoanalysis (superego, ego and id). The fall has
two meanings, a literal and a symbolic one....The archetype is
durable, but the sign (positive – belonging to the “above,” and
negative, belonging to the “below”) can be reversed...The struggle of
the below with the above is an image of rebellion.

For Stephen, as the figures of Lucifer and Christ blend into the figures of
Icarus and Daedalus, the distinction between myth and religion becomes increasingly
blurred. In turn, instead of following the figure of Prometheus, and the romantic
mode of rebellion and revolution that was inspired by it, he becomes concerned with
questions of aspiration, transcendence, and the possibility of catastrophe or downfall.
Interpellated in the street by the mocking epithets of his classmates, he finds himself

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149 Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 127
150 Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 137
151 For an extended history of these ideas, see Arthur Lovejoy’s classic study *The Great Chain of Being*
152 Kott, Jan. “The Vertical Axis: or, the Ambiguities of Prometheus” in *The Eating of the Gods*
(Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1987), 6
empowered rather than embarrassed by his namesake, and so their banter only ends up flattering his “mild proud sovereignty” all the more: “Now, as never before, his strange name seemed to him a prophecy. So timeless seemed the grey warm air, so fluid and impersonal his own mood, that all ages were as one to him.” With this imagined prophecy in mind, he starts to fantasize about his own potential to soar to the heights of artistic greatness unburdened by the weight of Christian guilt and repentance:

Now, at the name of the fabulous artificer, he seemed to hear the noise of dim waves and to see a winged form flying above the waves and slowly climbing the air. What did it mean? Was it a quaint device opening a page of some medieval book of prophecies and symbols, a hawk-like man flying sunward above the sea, a prophecy of the end he had been born to serve and had been following through he mists of childhood and boyhood, a symbol of the artist forging anew in his workshop out of the sluggish matter of the earth a new soaring impalpable imperishable being?

From here, Stephen’s epiphany turns into a more ecstatic and “profane joy” in which he feels his entire body overcome with the sensation of his soul in flight:

His heart trembled; his breath came faster and a wild spirit passed over his limbs as though he were soaring sunward. His heart trembled in an ecstasy of fear and his soul was in flight. His soul was soaring in an air beyond the world and the body he knew was purified in a breath and delivered of incertitude and made radiant and commingled with the element of the spirit. His soul had arisen form the grave of boyhood, spurning her graveclothes. Yes! Yes! Yes! He would create proudly out of the freedom and power of his soul, as the great artificer whose name he bore, a living thing, new and soaring and beautiful, impalpable, imperishable.

Thus Stephen sees himself achieving manhood as if his “soul had arisen from the grave of boyhood” and taken flight in the air. He calls this ecstatic feeling “profane” because it overturns his Christian teachings with romantic neo-paganism, and because the “hawk-like man” of his vision akin to Lucifer, whose claim “non serviam” stands for the sin of pride in opposition to the Holy Father. Instead of seeing himself as Icarus, Stephen imagines he has taken the place of the artificer-father himself, and thus appears to overstep the bounds of ambition into the realm of hubris.

Much later, during his wanderings throughout the city, Stephen turns his head upward once more in order to reflect on the idea of ascension through the more quotidian example of birds flying in the air. Described as “a swerve,” the common translation for the Lucretian idea of clinamen, their flight represents the

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153 Joyce, Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, 183
154 Joyce, Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, 183
155 Joyce, Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, 183-4.
mobility of free will independent of a higher power. Further reflecting on the idea of prophetic “augury” and the mystical theories of Cornelius Agrippa and Swedenborg, he begins to romanticize the vitality of the birds as existing outside the realm of *logos*:

Why was he gazing upwards from the steps of the porch, hearing their shrill twofold cry, watching their flight? For an augury of good or evil? A phrase of Cornelius Agrippa flew through his mind and then there flew hither and thither shapeless thoughts from Swedenborg on the correspondence of birds to things of the intellect and of how the creatures of the air have their knowledge and know their times and seasons because they, unlike man, are in the order of their life and have not perverted that order by reason.156

With this image of birds in flight, Stephen reconsiders his place in the tradition of “the ages,” envisioning around him ancient temples, mythical figures and gods, and feeling a “a fear of symbols and portents, of the hawklike man whose name he bore soaring out of his captivity on osierwoven wings, of Thoth, the god of writers…”157 Now that he has come closer to realizing the destiny apparently prophesied by his name, he begins to feel a sense of fear about the consequences of his potential. Instead of remaining beholden to canonized names and overarching deities, he begins to see himself as a center around which others may turn. By the conclusion of the novel, however, his apprehensive fear turns to bold confidence as he declares his mission to “forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.”158

This represents a complete reversal from Stephen’s sense of self at the beginning of the novel, in which he conceives of his relationship to the world around him as a centrifugal spiraling outward from his immediate environment to the outer reaches of the universe:

Stephen Dedalus
Class of Elements
Clongowes Wood College
Sallins
County Kildare
Ireland
Europe
The World
The Universe159

Once he has grown up and recognized his purpose as an artist at the end of the novel, however, Stephen’s sense of himself in space also changes, and he ultimately

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156 Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 244
157 Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 244
158 Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 276
159 Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 12
envisions himself as a centripetal force of attraction rather than a centrifugal point of departure. No longer characterized by the levity of his boyhood aspiration, he has become a man of gravitas. The spatial metaphors in this shift in aesthetic self-consciousness become especially apparent during his extended critique of Lessing’s aesthetics in conversation with his friend Lynch, when he ultimately suggests that aesthetic achievement involves closing the distance between the personality and imagination of the artist and the experience and appreciation of his work by others. For Stephen, literature graduates from lyric to epic, narrative, and dramatic forms by becoming less and less personal. According to this theory, the greatest literary achievements are in drama, where the personality of the artist “refines itself out of existence,” diffusing its “vitality” and “emotional gravity” into the work itself so that the creator, creation, and audience ultimately appear as one:

The simplest epical form is seen emerging out of lyrical literature when the artist prolongs and broods upon himself as the centre of an epical event and this form progresses till the centre of emotional gravity is equidistant from the artist himself and from others. The narrative is no longer purely personal. The personality of the artist passes into narration itself, flowing round and round the persons and the action like a vital sea. The dramatic form is reached when the vitality which has flowed and eddied round each person fills every person with such vital force that he or she assumes a proper and intangible esthetic life. The personality of artist, at first a cry or a cadence or a mood and then a fluid and lambent narrative, finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalizes itself, so to speak. The mystery of esthetic like that of material creation is accomplished. The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.160

As Stephen attempts to conceptualize the sublimation of subjectivity into an aesthetic plane of immanence, the Bergsonian ideas of élan vital and circulating flows are not far afield. No doubt Joyce drew from Bergson to some extent just as he did from Lessing, Nietzsche, and others, but it remains an open question to what extent Stephen functions as a mouthpiece for Joyce’s own beliefs, as he increasingly became an ironic alter ego that Joyce appealed to with largely mock identification.

If Apollinaire asserted the aesthetics of aspiration with lyric vigor, and Kafka developed an existential irony with regard to ascension and transcendence, then Joyce appears to have struck a middle-ground between the two. His Kunstlerroman characterizes Stephen as oscillating between expressive aspiration and arrogant extravagance, thus making it clear that he is striving not only to develop as an artist, but also to establish a sense of balance and confidence as a man. And so Stephen concludes his Bildung with one final request: “Old father, old artificer, stand me now

160 Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 233
and ever in good stead.” The most obvious reference here is of course to Daedalus, and so Stephen’s request to be kept in “good stead” suggests a persistent fear that he might ultimately be in danger of an Icarian fall. If he is still influenced by his Christian upbringing, then we may further interpret his anxiety as a Kierkegaardian “dizziness of freedom” revolving around the question of whether his fall would follow the path of Lucifer, the fallen angel, or Adam, the fallen man.

When Stephen reappears at the beginning of *Ulysses* in the mold of Telemachus, we realize that he is still searching for a father figure to guide him, and that he has left Christianity even further behind in his turn to a “new paganism.” Buck Mulligan immediately identifies him as a like-minded anti-Christian, but also criticizes him for neglecting to pray for his dying mother: “I’m hyperborean as much as you. But to think of your mother begging you with her last breath to kneel down and pray for her. And you refused.” His reference is not only to the ancient Greek legend of Hyperboreans, the northern land of perpetual spring and plenitude, but also no doubt to Nietzsche’s *The Anti-Christ* (1896), which opens with the line: “Let’s look ourselves in the face. We are Hyperboreans; we are well aware how far off the beaten track we live.” A little later Nietzsche goes on to argue that this self-recognition of pathological wandering is not actually a timeless condition, but is in fact a particular symptom of modernity: “This modernity made us ill – this indolent place, this cowardly compromise, the whole virtuous filth of the modern yes and no.”

Thus when Buck actually hands Stephen the mirror he had been using to shave and tells him to look at himself in the glass, we may read his gesture as a reiteration of Nietzsche’s call to “look ourselves in the face.” To this Stephen responds with the bold, often-cited declaration: “It is a symbol of Irish art. The cracked lookingglass of a servant.” Stuart Gilbert and many others have noted that this is an obvious echo of Oscar Wilde’s essayistic dialogue “The Decay of Lying: An Observation,” in which Cyril says to Vivian: “I can quite understand your objection to art being treated as a mirror. You think it would reduce genius to the position of a cracked looking-glass.” But given the Nietzschean references already established in their conversation, Stephen’s description of Irish servitude may also be read in relation to Nietzsche’s critique of servitude and slave morality. Indeed, this is exactly how Mulligan responds in identifying both Stephen and himself as Nietzschean heroes of the will to power: “I’m the Uebermensch. Toothless Kinch and I, the supermen.”

Despite these claims, Stephen maintains a critical distance from Nietzsche’s philosophy of power, truth and lies, and though he acknowledges a debt of influence

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162 Joyce, *Ulysses*, 5
164 Joyce, *Ulysses*, 6
165 Joyce, *Ulysses*, 22
to many Germanic philosophers, he never mentions Nietzsche among them.\textsuperscript{166} His neo-paganism thus never becomes either anti-Christian or Oedipal, and so his wandering remains a continuation of his search for a mentor\textsuperscript{167} or father figure to keep him “in good stead.” Despite being “a bit unsteady” as an adult, he never develops a full-blown case of artistic hubris, or what Binswanger would call \textit{Verstiegenheit},\textsuperscript{168} and thanks above all to the supportive influence of Leopold Bloom, he ultimately manages to keep his feet on the ground. In this turn from personal transcendence to dialogic pluralism, Stephen’s aesthetic aspiration moves away from the vertical axis of tragic catastrophe and \textit{kairos} or crisis-time and toward a more horizontal narrative of epic duration and \textit{chronos} or chronological time.

**Leopold Bloom’s Comic Gravity**

When Bloom eventually befriends Stephen toward the end of \textit{Ulysses}, it is the more experienced \textit{Luftmensch} who assumes the role of his paternal guide, and who in fact literally keeps him from falling. After their visit to the Nighttown brothel in “Circe,” Stephen ends up drunk and staggering in the street, and it is Bloom who props him up and helps him stay standing:

\begin{quote}
\textbf{BLOOM: (Propping him.)} Retain your own.
\textbf{STEPHEN: (Laughs emptily.)} My centre of gravity is displaced. I have forgotten the trick. Let us sit down somewhere and discuss.\textsuperscript{169}
\end{quote}

The entire episode of “Circe” is written in the form of dramatic dialogue rather than narrative prose, and so, according to Stephen’s aesthetic theory, it would appear to represent literature at its most refined. In turn, Joyce’s persona as an author also appears increasingly “refined out of existence” over the course of the novel. For if we take Stephen to be an ironic version of Joyce’s own youthful self, his deferral to Bloom as the central protagonist of \textit{Ulysses} suggests a further distancing of the author-figure from the world of his imagination. Even more than in the dramatic episode of “Circe,” in which Stephen remains a key player, this sublimation of the artist into an invisible subject eventually culminates in Molly Bloom’s monologue at the end, where we find the male characters edged offstage and the passionate voice of the leading female role bringing the book to a close.

\textsuperscript{166} References to Nietzsche’s \textit{Thus Spoke Zarathustra} appear several other times in \textit{Ulysses}. For instance, in “Oxen in the Sun,” we read: “Go thou and do likewise. Thus, or words to that effect, said Zarathustra, sometime regius professor of French letters to the university of Oxtail nor breathed there ever that man to whom mankind was more beholden” (393); “How saith Zarathustra? \textit{Deine Kuh Trübsal melkest Du. Nun trinkt Du die süsse Milch des Euters}” (424); “Query. Who’s astanding this here do? Proud professor of damnall. Declare misery. Bet to the ropes. Me nantee saltie. Not a red at me this week gone. Yours? Mead of our father for the \textit{Übermensch}. Ditto” (425).

\textsuperscript{167} This word actually derives from Homer’s \textit{Odyssey}, in which the character Mentor takes on the role of teacher to Telemachus after Odysseus has left for battle. Joyce alludes to this in his schemata by listing the term under the chapter heading “Telemachus.”

\textsuperscript{168} See notes 9 and 10 above.

\textsuperscript{169} Joyce, \textit{Ulysses}, 589
Leopold Bloom may be regarded as a comic character, but to see him standing only for levity would be to overlook his otherwise important and weighty presence in the novel. And so he might be better described as a figure of comic gravity. Although Bloom’s fanciful imagination is generally light-hearted, it is also ponderous: his neurotic pontifications have weight, and thus pull him down at least as much as they lift him up. When we are first introduced to him in “Calypso,” we find him pondering his grounded stature in relation to his flighty cat: “Wonder what I look like to her. Height of a tower? No, she can jump me.”

In the next episode, “Lotus-Eaters,” he goes on to contemplate the force of gravity itself after imagining a man floating on his back in the dead sea:

Where was the chap I saw in that picture somewhere? Ah, in the dead sea, floating on his back, reading a book with a parasol open. Couldn’t sink if you tried: so thick with salt. Because the weight of the water, no, the weight of the body in the water is equal to the weight of the. Or is it the volume is equal of the weight? It’s a law something like that. Vance in high school cracking his fingerjoints, teaching. The college curriculum. Cracking curriculum. What is weight really when you say the weight? Thirtytwo feet per second, per second. Law of falling bodies: per second, per second. They all fall to the ground. The earth. It’s the force of gravity of the earth is the weight.

Here Bloom reaches for laws of nature in order to better understand the apparently random images resurfacing from his memory. Yet instead of leading to any definite conclusions, as for instance Galileo attempted centuries before in his atomistic “Discourse on Floating Bodies,” his thoughts become drowned out in the flow of his stream-of-consciousness. The image of water trickles back into his mind shortly afterward when he asks for orangeflower water at the chemist’s, and from there arrives at the idea of going to the Turkish bath to relax his aging body. Eventually he does indeed end up floating in the bath, feeling uplifted and joyful about the lightness of his body – especially his genitalia, the principle organ of the chapter, according to Joyce’s schemata. While never actually becoming erect, he senses his “trunk and limbs riprippled over and sustained, buoyed lightly upward,” while his “limp father of thousands” appears like “a languid floating flower.” Later in “Ithaca,” Bloom is described as a “waterlover, drawer of water, watercarrier returning to the range,” and in answer to the catechistic question, “What is the first thing he admires about water?” we learn: “It’s universality: its democratic equality and constancy to its nature in seeking its own level.” While Stephen remains afraid of water and drowning, as the mythical Icarus perhaps should have been, Bloom has learned to find himself at home in it. Despite his appearance as a stereotypical Luftmensch, his relatively balanced, watery nature stands in stark contrast to Stephen’s more airy aspirations.

While Stephen is described as “centrifugal,” Bloom is “centripetal.” As a

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170 Joyce, *Ulysses*, 55
171 Joyce, *Ulysses*, 72
172 Joyce, *Ulysses*, 86
173 Joyce, *Ulysses*, 671. We may in turn compare this to Stephen’s fascination with water in “Proteus.”
174 Joyce, *Ulysses*, 703
benevolent, paternal force of centralization, Bloom’s orientation toward horizontal equality and equilibrium is defined as fundamentally democratic, universal, and constant. In turn, although never actually described as physically heavy, he comes to represent a certain metaphysical gravity in his ability to regain equilibrium in the face of adversity and leverage in the face of obstacles. For instance, when he decides to climb over the railings to get inside his house after realizing that he has forgotten his keys in his other trousers, we wonder along with the narrator, “Did he fall?” and we are not surprised to learn (in great detail) that the answer is yes: “By his body’s known weight of eleven stone and four pounds in avoirdupois measure, as certified by the graduated machine for periodical softweighing in the premises of Francis Froedman, pharmaceutical chemist of 19 Frederick street, north, on the last feast of the Ascension.”175 He does not remain fallen for long, however: “Regaining new stable equilibrium he rose uninjured though concussed by the impact, raised the latch of the area door by the exertion of force at its freely moving flange and by leverage of the first kind applied at its fulcrum gained retarded access to the kitchen through the subadjacent scullery.”176

While Portrait represents Stephen wavering on the edge of comedy and tragedy while striving for the heights of aesthetic freedom, Ulysses takes us down to the horizontal level of the epic, in which the hero never remains fallen for long. While tragic time represents the crisis of vertical ascent and fall comparable to the ancient Greek idea of kairós, epic time represents a more horizontal and circular form of durational chronology, which was distinguished by the idea of chōrōn. Michel Foucault defines the distinct implications of these two spatio-temporal orders in remarkable ways in his early commentary on Binswanger’s existential, psychoanalytic phenomenology:

The tragic movement is always of the order of ascent and fall. Its special mark is that privileged moment in which it completes its rise, and balances imperceptibly, still, yet oscillating, before faltering. That is why tragedy hardly needs time and space in which to extend itself, not foreign lands, not even the suence of the night, for it sets itself the task of manifesting the vertical transcendence of destiny.177

In contrast to this tragic time, Foucault argues that “the time of the epic is circular or reiterative” because “it tries to close around itself, to recommence by linking up again to its beginning.” Thus while tragedy takes place along a vertical axis of progressive ascent and catastrophic downfall (as we shall see in the next chapter), the epic takes place on the horizontal axis of departure and return:

Horizontal opposition of the near and far exhibits time only in the chronology of spatial progression. Time unfolds only between a point of departure and a point of arrival, and is wholly exhausted in the journeying; and when it renews itself, it does so in the form of

175 Joyce, Ulysses, 668
176 Joyce, Ulysses, 669
177 Foucault, Michel and Binswanger, Ludwig. Dream and Existence, 64
repetition, return, another departure. In this existential direction, time is in its essence nostalgic. ¹⁷⁸

For Joyce, this shift from the vertical and linear to the horizontal and circular involved not only the imitation of epic form, but also an implicit turn away from Nietzsche’s critique of tragic aesthetics and Christian theology and toward Giambattista Vico’s philosophy of recursive history. According to Vico, as he argues in his *Scienza Nuova*, civilization develops in a recurring cycle (*ricorso*) of three ages: the divine, the heroic, and the human. Each of these may in turn be characterized as being dominated by different forms of language: while the primitive *giganti* of the divine age rely on metaphor to understand human and natural phenomena through comparison, and those of the more feudal heroic age depend on metonymy, the human age of popular democracy is represented by ironic forms of rational speech that Vico calls a *barbarie della riflessione* or barbarism of reflection. It is this excess of rhetoric that ultimately causes civilization to turn back to the poetic and descend once more into age of the divine, thus completing the recurring cycle that Vico calls the *storia ideale eterna* or ideal eternal history.

Under the heading “Vico’s Anabasis,” James Robert Goetsch points out that Vico’s idea of history is not simply cyclical, however, but is also based to a large extent on metaphors of vertical mobility. According to Goetsch:

> In the modern way of inquiry, as exemplified in Cartesianism, we only ascend – and we never look back. We ascend from particularity to universality, leaving behind the binding contingencies of humanity, the strictures of time and place, in our search for the exact functional technique that will allow us to adjust reality to our specifications.

> Vico’s anabasis is different: it is a return to the beginning, which is always firmly rooted in a time and a place, as a real birth must be. The *Scienza nuova* seeks to teach us how to undertake such an anabasis for ourselves; Vico becomes our guide on a journey to the netherworld, where we discover the roots of the great tree of human making and knowing. He becomes for us what the Italians call a *cicerone*: a guide who can show us the sights in a knowledgeable way and speak of them with eloquence.

> When we ascend back to our place in our time, which Vico calls the third age, we must recollect these governing roots in order to make a new place for ourselves. In doing so we are able to discern both the pattern of our times and our place in it. We then become like the divine – though not identical with it. We achieve self-knowledge. Looking back on our path of inquiry each of us can say with Heraclitus, “I sought for myself.” ¹⁷⁹

From this perspective, we may compare Vico’s historical *ricorso* not only to Xenophon’s story of post-war descent and ascent, to which Goetsch alludes in his title (and

¹⁷⁸ Foucault, Michel and Binswanger, Ludwig. *Dream and Existence*, 64
to which Saint-Jean Perse returned in order to develop the modernist poem he called “Anabasis”), but also to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, in which departure and return are figured in terms of downward and upward narrative movements.

These complicated spatial dynamics are of course key for Beckett’s 1929 essay “Dante…Bruno.Vico.Joyce,” which he wrote as a response to the *Work in Progress* that Joyce first published in the pages of *transition*. With this in mind, it would make sense to read the famous *transition* manifesto of that same year, “Revolution of the World,” as a closely-related precursor to its lesser-known follow-up, “Poetry is Vertical,” which was published three years later with a signature from Beckett attached. Whether modernist or avant-garde, both manifestoes depended on cyclical concepts of revolutionary movement as well as the vertical aesthetics of aspiration in order to launch their progressive appeals for aesthetic transcendence. As we shall see in the next chapter, however, the fear of catastrophe persisted despite such metropolitan assertions of ascension – or perhaps because of it.
Chapter Two
METROPOLITAN ASCENDANCE AND CATASTROPHE:
French Responses to the Rise of New York City

“Astonishing country where the houses are taller than the churches….the vertical push is in line with the economic order.” So wrote Fernand Léger in his 1931 essay “New York” after visiting the ascendant city for the first time. Wondering to himself, “What is this new religion?”, he answered: “It’s Wall Street that dominates this new world in all of its height.” Léger’s wonder and astonishment may seem dated today, but his point remains surprisingly acute: in contrast to the predominantly Christian verticality of modern European cities, as well as the centralizing role of Paris as the “capital of the nineteenth century,” as Walter Benjamin called it, the skyscrapers of New York have come to symbolize the simultaneous secularization, commercialization, and Americanization of metropolitan modernity. While the Eiffel Tower “shepherdess” of Apollinaire’s “Zone” has come to appear increasingly quaint in comparison, the search for aesthetic and spiritual meaning amidst the flux of modern metropolitan life has nonetheless persisted. In nineteenth-century Paris, Baudelaire called this “the eternal” as opposed to “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent.” In the twentieth century, however, as New York gradually came to replace Paris as the self-proclaimed capital of the world, this opposition came to be defined above all in terms of the urban skyline and the horizontal level of the street. As E.B. White observed in his celebrated 1949 essay “Here Is New York”:

Manhattan has been compelled to expand skyward because of the absence of any other direction in which to grow. This, more than any other thing, is responsible for its physical majesty. It is to the nation what the white church spire is to the village — the visible symbol of aspiration and faith, the white plume saying that the way is up.

In contrast to Max Weber’s call for the European “disenchantment of the world,” many twentieth-century artists and writers turned from Paris to New York for modernist re-enchantment. And despite suspicions of American shortsightedness and hubris, the rise of New York as a modern cosmopolitan city appealed to French travelers in particular as a potential alternative to the more right-wing, “reactionary modernism” that was emerging on the Continent with the rise of fascism in Italy and National Socialism in Germany. After the defeat of these movements in World War II, it became undeniable clear that New York

181 Léger, 152: “C’est Wall Street qui domine de toute sa hauteur ce monde nouveau.”
183 I borrow this term from Jeffrey Herf’s book Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and in the Third Reich (Cambridge University Press, 1996), which provides a critical intellectual history of the vision of modernity that Joseph Goebbels called “the steel-like romanticism of the twentieth century.”

Shortly before the Wall Street Crash of 1929, Paul Morand also remarked on the pseudo-secular, capitalist verticalization of metropolitan modernity when he called the skyscraper “the modern artist’s symbol of America” as well as a cathedral-like “shrine” of “financial success” in his book-length travel essay, also entitled \textit{New York}:

Whatever people may say, the skyscrapers are in no way indebted to Babylon or to the Indian pueblos. If a style is the expression of life at a given moment, America now has every right to say that she has a style...they are the shrines of Success – financial success, as pleasing to the Puritan God as prayer. Like cathedral spires, they strain heavenward with an urgency at once mystic and economic. This is the deep organic beauty which these cloud houses, as Ford Madox Ford says, have to offer us. This morning, making my way up Broadway, I reflect that the man of to-day is bound to approve them, as a Greek the Parthenon.\footnote{Morand, Paul. \textit{New York} (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1930), 45-6.}


Here Morand argues that American national culture appears to have expressed its “style” first and foremost through the erection of its urban skyscrapers. Although these “shrines of success” may appear secular, his suggestion is that their public economic function is nonetheless mystical or devotional, and so he feels compelled to compare them to the Greek Parthenon and the European cathedral. Morand returns to this religious rhetoric later in his book when he calls the Woolworth Building a “cathedral of business men” before going on to call it “the Eiffel Tower of New York” (his need to refer back to familiar cultural models perhaps an inevitable aspect of all representations of the “other,” as anthropologist James Clifford argues in his essay “On Ethnographic Allegory”).\footnote{186 At the end of this passage, Morand even goes as far as to fantasize that from the height of the Woolworth Building he can literally look back at Europe:}
The Woolworth is a kind of cathedral of business men, with sixty floors of offices, dating from the period when the Americans were shamefaced about their constructions and tried to hide them under complicated garments and allusions to earlier epochs. In this respect, it is a transition style. Raised by the kind of cheap bazaars, this Eiffel Tower of New York is the delight of foreigners and provincials; as soon as we enter the marble and polished granite hall, young Amazons in amaranthine uniforms open the polished copper doors of a strong-box, which proves to be one of its twenty-eight elevators. In less than a minute this vertical railway deposits me on the fifty-sixth floor, and from here New York looks like the miniature city which the
King of Siam took his pleasure in building amid his gardens. Dazzled by the glare of the sun on the Atlantic, I find myself in the open sky, so high up that I feel I ought to be able to see Europe…How can one describe from such a height this miniature metropolis? It is topography, it is triangulation – not literature. 187

Morand’s comparisons to the medieval European cathedral and the ancient Greek temple are obvious precursors for Le Corbusier’s rather more bold and provocative book When the Cathedrals Were White, published right after his first trip to New York in 1935. In writing this impressionistic travelogue, Le Corbusier was influenced to a large extent by his French predecessors as well as the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche, as Mardges Bacon points out in her in-depth study Le Corbusier in America. 188 Following in the footsteps of Morand and Louis-Ferdinand Céline, whose literary style he studied carefully and who shared his growing interest in right-wing radicalism, 189 Le Corbusier was also a close friend of Léger’s, and in fact the two spent time together in New York, as both were preparing exhibitions for the Museum of Modern Art in the same year. 190 Le Corbusier had been invited to the MOMA by Philip Johnson (himself a Nazi sympathizer and anti-Semite during this time), 191 and had already been shown in the landmark show “The International Style: Architecture Since 1922,” which Johnson curated together with Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and Henry-Russel Hitchcock in 1932.

187 Morand, 54. As we shall see later, Michel de Certeau adopts a remarkably similar tropology in describing the view from the top of the World Trade Center, except that he comes to the exact opposite conclusion – that the city below is indeed a form of literature.

188 Bacon, Mardges, Le Corbusier in America: Travels in the Land of the Timid (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 137-8. As Bacon points out, one of the first French writings on New York that Le Corbusier read was a 1926 essay by his friend Christian Zervos, the editor of Cahiers d’art (the journal in which Léger published his essay five years later). Zervos’s account was published in the first issue of his journal and was illustrated with a flashy, kinetic photograph of Times Square originally taken by Fritz Lang (for Erich Mendelsohn’s book Amerika). Other predecessors include Georges Duhamel’s Scènes de la future (1930) and André Maurois’s En Amérique (1933), based on his travels in 1927 and 1931.

189 On Le Corbusier’s move to the far right of French politics in the 1930s, see McCleod, Mary, Urbanism and Utopia: Le Corbusier From Regional Syndicalism to Vitry (PhD Dissertation, Princeton University, 1985) and Antliff, Mark. Avant-Garde Fascism: The Mobilization of Myth, Art and Culture in France (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).


191 See for instance Robert A.M. Stern’s memorial essay on Johnson for Architectural Record: “Many have brought up Johnson’s Nazi and American right-wing sympathies of the 1930s as if this were secret information. Embarrassing, yes, but not secret…It was not only Johnson’s pro-Nazism, but also his presumed anti-Semitism that we [students and faculty at Yale] considered.” Far more critical is Michael Sorkin’s essay published in the same issue: “Johnson's fascination with fascism deeply informed his work….His own philosophy was rooted in a school-boy Nietzscheanism of supermen and the will to power. Indeed, his major contribution to the intellectual history of architecture is probably his early, largely successful effort to introduce Modernism to the United States (via the famous 1932 Museum of Modern Art Modern Architecture show) in a way that thoroughly sheared it of its originating commitment to social betterment, reducing its content to nothing but form.” Both essays are available online at: http://archrecord.construction.com/people/profiles/archives/0505johnsonProfile.asp
For each of these artistic wanderers in search of future prospects in the 1930s, it was increasingly becoming clear: although the modernist verticalization of urban space may have first gained ground with the construction of the Eiffel Tower for the 1889 Paris Exposition Universelle, or of the White City for the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, it took off above all in New York City over the course of the twentieth century. After the Wall Street Crash of 1929, however, French wonder at the ascendancy of New York became measured by a strangely apocalyptic fantasy of revolutionary catastrophe. In political-economic terms, this was arguably related to what Joseph Schumpeter called “creative destruction” not long afterward. Indeed, as Richard Sennett has pointed out, “Even today, with historic controls, New York skyscrapers are planned to last fifty years, and financed accordingly, though as engineered objects they could last much longer. Of all the world’s cities, New York has the most destroyed itself in order to grow.”

With regard to modernization in general, David Harvey has argued even more boldly that “creative destruction is embedded in the circulation of capital itself. Innovation exacerbates instability, insecurity, and in the end, becomes the prime force of pushing capitalism into periodic paroxysms of crisis.”

In more cultural terms, inter-war French representations of New York also exemplified the much-debated arguments of Jacob Taubes and Karl Löwith that ostensibly modern ideas of historical progress derive largely from the legacies of theology, and especially eschatology. In turn, according to Nietzsche’s aesthetic philosophy, which appealed to so many of them during this time, New York was a Dionysian city rather than an Appollonian one. For although these visitors were obviously awestruck by the towering architecture and expanding power of New York, they also saw the ascendant metropolis as fundamentally in crisis and in imminent danger of destruction, disaster or ruin.

New York thus came to be seen during this time not only as a “vertical city” [ville debout], but also as an “enchanted catastrophe” [catastrophe féerique], as Le Corbusier called it. Although the idea of the “vertical” or “standing-up” city has also been attributed to him, it was in fact Céline who first coined the phrase in the pages of his 1934 novel *Journey to the End*

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192 This term was coined by German sociologist Werner Sombart in 1913, and was later developed and popularized by economist Joseph Schumpeter in his 1942 book *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1975), which he wrote after moving to the United States when the Nazis came to power in Germany. For a discussion of the Nietzschean and Indian genealogy of this theory, see Reinert, Hugo and Reinert, Eric S., “Creative Destruction in Economics: Nietzsche, Sombart, Schumpeter” in *Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900): Economy and Society* (Springer, 2006). For an argument about its role in the rise of New York City, see Page, Max. *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan: 1900-1940* (University of Chicago Press, 1999). Another book from the same year discusses this idea in the development of American literature: Fisher, Philip. *Still the New World: American Literature in a Culture of Creative Destruction* (Harvard University Press, 1999).


194 Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 19990), 106

of the Night [Voyage au bout de la nuit]. In the opening to the section devoted to his alter ego’s trip to New York, Céline describes the arrival to the city by boat as follows:

> Just imagine, that city was standing absolutely erect. New York was a standing city [New York, c’est une ville debout]. Of course we’d seen cities, fine ones too, and magnificent seaports. But in our part of the world cities lie along the seacoast or on rivers, they recline in the landscape, awaiting the traveler, while this American city had nothing languid about her, she stood there as stiff as a board, not seductive at all, terrifyingly stiff.¹⁹⁶

Later on, he defines the view of the skyscrapers from the level of the street as a “reverse vertigo,” suggesting that there was still some time before this term would come to signify the fear of heights as opposed to mere dizziness or whirling around on a horizontal plane: “Raising my eyes to the ramparts, I felt a kind of reverse vertigo, because there were really too many windows and so much alike whichever way you looked that it turned my stomach.”¹⁹⁷

In addition to dizziness and nausea, Céline’s other response to the confusing verticality of the city is laughter: “We laughed like fools. You can’t help laughing at a city built straight up and down like that.”¹⁹⁸ Morand also imagined the need to laugh at the buildings of New York, but for him, even before the Wall Street crash, this was specifically in response to the city’s catastrophic form of renewal: “The town spends its all, lives on credit…is ruined, starts again and laughs.”¹⁹⁹ Later, in the midst of the Great Depression, Fernand Léger’s fantasy of the creative destruction of New York is even more startling, as he compares it to his recollection of combat duty in the First World War:

> Destroy New York, they will rebuild it all anyway. Including the works of architecture, such admirable targets. Demolish New York! It’s impossible that Marshal Pétain wasn’t tempted for at least a second, a half-second. What a magnificent job for an artilleryman! It’s not a question of war, is it, my General? I did Verdun under his orders, that’s enough – for sport, for the love of the craft! The Americans were the first to applaud and now what do you see? Soon after a new city is built, then what? I give you a thousand! In glass, in glass!”²⁰⁰

Léger was however distinct from Morand, Céline and Le Corbusier in that he did not turn to

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¹⁹⁷ Céline, 165. See my chapter on the film Vertigo (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958) for more on this question.
¹⁹⁸ Céline, 159
¹⁹⁹ Morand, 138.
²⁰⁰ "Détruisez New York, ils le reconstruiront tout autrement. D’ailleurs, ces architectures, quelles cibles admirables. Démolir New York! Il n’est pas possible que le maréchal Pétain n’en ait pas eu une seconde, une demi-seconde, la tentation. Quel magnifique boulot pour un artilleur! Pas question de guerre, n’est-ce pas, mon Général? J’ait fait Verdun sous ses ordres, c’est suffisant, mais pour le sport, pour l’amour du métier! Les Américains seraient les premiers à applaudir et alors que verriez-vous? Quelque temps après une nouvelle ville s’édifierait, devinez comment? Je vous le donne en mille! En verre, en verre!“ Léger, 158-9
extreme right-wing politics as a counter-balance to European fears about “the decline of the West” after World War I. As for these other French travelers, their fantasies of American catastrophe were arguably related to the far more anti-American politics of Martin Heidegger, who reviled the “destructive evil” of “symbolic America” in various contemporary writings, and, as Richard Wolin informs us, actually defined the entire country as “the site of catastrophe” in a lecture he presented in Germany in 1942. In the racial fantasy of Céline, this was embodied most visibly by the figure of the “catastrophic Negro,” who worked as a servant for his beloved Lola, the white American woman who first inspired his protagonist’s voyage to New York after he met her in Paris.

The irony is that it was above all Europe that fell into catastrophic ruin in the following decade rather than the United States, and so without realizing it, these French writers may have been writing at least as much about themselves as the Americans. For although the Depression and Second World War caused devastation throughout the world, the military destruction of European societies enabled the rise of what Henry Luce first called “the American century” in his 1941 editorial for Life magazine, which called for American intervention in the allied war effort. Soon after the war was over, Jean-Paul Sartre confronted this apparent historical shift with a sort of begrudging paternalism in his 1946 travel essay “New York, the Colonial City”:

The war has certainly taught the Americans that their country was the greatest power in the world. But the period of easy living is over; many economists fear a new depression. Thus, no more skyscrapers are being built. It seems they are too hard to rent….Far away I see the Empire State or the Chrysler Building reaching vainly toward the sky, and suddenly I think that

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Baudrillard also dwells on many of the other established tropes of Americanism that we will explore here: not only what he calls the “sublime” or “baroque verticality” of New York in his surprisingly brief (and racially charged) discussion of the city, but above all the fascination with the American desert, the Catastrophist geology of what he calls America’s “seismic form,” and the recurring idea of centrifugal vertigo. Of course *American Vertigo* (Random House, 2006) would later become the title of Bernard-Henri-Lévy’s book of travel essays about the United States, which bypasses New York almost entirely by emphasizing the urban, suburban and transitional spaces of the American West, South, and Midwest. Interestingly, both Baudrillard and Lévy feature photographs of flat, horizontal landscapes on the covers of their books, thus representing their ironic romanticization of the American desert and wide open road as opposed to the Big City. In turn, in veering away from the concern for metropolitan ascendance that we find in essays on New York from Morand to de Certeau, both end up exoticizing the peripheral, marginal, and “crazy” aspects of American culture, and for the most part avoid confronting the power and centralization of its symbolic and economic capital. Although Baudrillard claims to address this very question in his response to 9/11, *The Spirit of Terrorism* (New York and London: Verso, 2003), he nonetheless continues to appear excited by the sensationalistic spectacle of catastrophe, and his own self-proclaimed fantasies of it, rather than the reality, experience or consequences of violence.

202 Céline, 188.
New York is about to acquire a History and that it already possesses its ruins.203

A year later, Simone de Beauvoir came to the United States with even more romantic curiosity, and concluded that New York had already acquired its place in history, and that it was above all Europe that lay in ruins. “Paris has lost its hegemony,” she declared bluntly in her diary entry of January 27, 1947.204 How French critics gradually came to recognize this in their impressionistic and often fanciful responses to the rise of New York is what we shall investigate here.

**The American Secularization of Verticality**

Prior to the Industrial Revolution and the development of elevators and iron and steel frame construction, the tallest buildings in western cities were mainly churches, cathedrals or temples.205 In downtown Manhattan, it was Trinity Church that dominated the nineteenth-century skyline. Constructed in its current neo-Gothic form in 1846 (though originally founded in 1697),206 it overshadowed its neighbors until the end of the century. To this day its spire is still higher than the towers of the Brooklyn Bridge, which inspired poets as diverse as Marianne Moore, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Hart Crane, and Jack Kerouac. But already in 1904, when Henry James wrote his book-length essay *The American Scene*, both the bridge and the church were beginning to compete with office buildings.

For James, Trinity Church remained “an architectural object addressed, even in its prime aspiration, to the patient pedestrian sense and permitting thereby a relation of

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205 Major exceptions include the medieval towers of Bologna and high-rise apartments in Cairo and Shibam in Yemen and Fustat and Cairo in Egypt. In *The Conscience of the Eye*, Richard Sennett writes: “The spires we see on many medieval churches are nineteenth-century additions; height as it was originally conceived was a matter of looking up from within, in the act of prayer, and so of having a visual experience of the ascension.” Sennett also attempts an interpretation of religious architecture from a more comparative perspective: “The association of height with faith is not uniquely Christian, nor is the contrary of depth and evil. Early Islamic writers imagined the universe as funnel-shaped with circles of heaven and hell rather similar to those of Dante’s Divine Comedy. The difference between the medieval mosque builder and the Christian architect had to do with representation. The religion of the mosque builder forbade the painting of sacred images, to prevent idolatrous worship of them, and this prohibition extended to buildings, which must not seek to mimic the Godhead. Whereas the Christian builder, like the religious painter, attempted to make faith implicit to the eye. The cruciform shape of every church of course mimics Christ’s suffering on the Cross; equally explicit was the Ascension, registered in the extraordinary efforts to build upward.” Sennett, Richard, *The Conscience of the Eye*, 15.
206 In 1766, Trinity Parish also built St. Paul’s Chapel, located directly across the street from what is now the World Trade Center memorial site. This is the church that appears just in front of the Twin Towers in the black-and-white photograph by Andre Kertesz that is featured on the cover of Don DeLillo’s 1997 novel *Underworld*. According to the Chapel’s official website: “Today, St. Paul's Chapel is Manhattan's oldest public building in continuous use, and its only remaining colonial church.” See the following weblink: [http://www.saintpaulschapel.org/about_us/](http://www.saintpaulschapel.org/about_us/)
intimacy,” but he could not deny that churches in general “have been mercilessly deprived of their visibility.” In a strange passage toward the end of his discussion of skyscrapers, he imagines Trinity Church actually speaking to him in the first person about its “tragic case”:

Yes, the wretched figure I am making is as little as you see my fault – it is the fault of the buildings whose very first care is to deprive churches of their visibility. There are but two or three – two or three outward and visible churches – left in New York “anyway,” as you must have noticed, and even they are hideously threatened: a fact which no one, indeed, appears to be shocked, from which no one draws the least of the inferences that stick straight out of it, which every one seems in short to take for granted either with remarkable stupidity or with remarkable cynicism.207

By the time Paul Morand visited New York in 1929, Trinity Church was completely overshadowed by the skyscrapers around it, and his description of it appears nostalgic for the time when its “little brown spire dominated New York” and the “business” of religion still reigned visibly over Wall Street:

At the corner of Rector Street stands Trinity Church, the oldest church in New York. This seventeenth-century church, destroyed in the great fire, was rebuilt at the time of the Revolution. A graveyard in the English style surrounds it, but the graves, instead of being hidden beneath a coat of close Kentish turf, are mere puddles of grey mud. In the eighteenth century this little brown spire dominated New York; to-day, all blackened, with its gilt clock which stands out so pleasingly from the Curb Market, it is vanishing, strangled by banks, merely the smallest and darkest of the downtown monuments. Religion has no business here….208

Although the first office building with a passenger elevator, the Equitable Life Assurance Building, was built across the street from Trinity cemetery, it stood from 1870 to 1912 at only 130 feet, or 7 ½ stories – still well under the 284 feet of the church. It was only in 1890, when the 309-foot New York World Building was constructed, that the secular verticality of American commercial architecture began to overtake the religious verticality of the church. This twenty-story skyscraper, which housed the headquarters of The New York World newspaper, was also dubbed the Pulitzer Building after the paper’s editor, Joseph Pulitzer, who commissioned it and maintained an office in its top-floor dome. Along with the Woolworth Building, it is featured prominently in John Dos Passos’ 1925 novel Manhattan Transfer (as I discuss below), and excerpts from the pages of the newspaper also appeared as “Newsreels” in his later novels 1919 and The Big Money. The newspaper only lasted until 1931, and the building was eventually demolished in 1955, having already been supplanted as the world’s tallest office building in 1894 by the 348-foot Manhattan Life Insurance building, which in 1930 was also torn down.

208 Morand, 50.
Over the next forty years, the rapid development of skyscrapers would come to define the image of New York as the ascendant capital of the twentieth century both in terms of architectural height and in more symbolic terms of cultural and economic capital. The tallest structures built at the turn of the century include the thirty-story Park Row Building (Robert Henderson Robertson, 1899), which stands at 391 feet, and the iconic Flatiron Building (Daniel Burnham, 1902), which, at 285 feet, is only a foot taller than Trinity Church. But the true giants that would tower over the city for decades emerged in the years leading up to World War I: the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company Tower (Napoleon LeBrun, 1909) at 700 feet, the Municipal Building (McKim, Mead, and White, 1912) at 580 feet, and the neo-Gothic Woolworth Building (Cass Gilbert, 1913) at 792 feet.
The boom eventually came to an end with the construction of the Empire State Building in 1930, which remains, at 1,250 feet, the tallest surviving structure in New York. Of course the most iconic image of the Empire State Building in popular culture is still from the original King Kong (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933). In the film’s famous grand finale, the tower’s imperial verticality stands as a foil to the racialized monster from the colonial South Pacific, who tries to escape his pursuers by climbing to its top with his blond captive (Fay Wray) in hand, only to be brought down by an onslaught of American air power in the end. By contrast, the Eiffel Tower has inspired comparatively little popular terror. Taking a leading role in the French film Paris qui dort (René Clair, 1925), it acts mainly as a light-hearted source of comedy at the expense of the villainous mad scientist’s plot to freeze the people of Paris with his “crazy ray.” Revolving around those who survived the scientist’s attack because they happened to have been at a high enough altitude – including a janitor living at the top of the Eiffel Tower and a group of wealthy travelers flying in an airplane overhead – the film shows how they eventually manage to overthrow him and restore the city to normal in the end.

King Kong (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933)

209 Other major examples of New York’s skyscraper boom include the second incarnation of the Equitable Building (Ernest Graham, 1915) at 538 feet or 38 stories; the New York Life Building (Cass Gilbert, 1928) at 615 feet; the Mercantile Building (Ludlow and Peabody, 1929) at 620 feet; 40 Wall Street (H. Craig Severance, 1930) at 927 feet; and the Chrysler Building (William Van Alen, 1928-30), whose spire reaches 1,046 feet.

Traveling from Paris to New York at the peak of the skyscraper boom, Morand was apparently more impressed by the ascendant city’s tall buildings than most everything else he saw there. One of his more remarkable observations is that the experience of urban verticality is for the most part a daytime one, since most tall buildings empty out at night:

The skyscrapers, these great presses of humanity, disgorge their exhausted contents. The vertical arrangement of individuals will now give way to the new, horizontal arrangement for night-time. At the foot of the buildings the revolving doors are whirling like crazy wheels, each fan blowing out human beings on to the sidewalk. In Europe there are no crowds.211

That said, even the crowded streets are not entirely horizontal for Morand, as he later compares them to a ladder for social climbing: “The streets are arranged like the rungs of a ladder, and socially one climbs them, like a parrot, with the help of beak and claws. At thirty, one is in Thirtieth Street, at seventy, in Seventieth Street. The word ‘climber’ here takes on its fullest sense.”212 While taxis for Morand are “horizontal tubes,” elevators are “vertical ones,” and the telephone is an “automatic gun” that makes non-contiguous communication

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211 Morand, 73.
212 Morand, 312.
immediate regardless of distance.\textsuperscript{213} As Morand recognizes, the remarkable speed of new forms of transportation and telecommunication was revolutionizing the practice of everyday life not only across the horizontal space of the streets, but vertically, through the mobility of elevators, not to mention beyond the spatial coordinates of the city, thanks to the invention of the telephone.\textsuperscript{214} Although this new vertical mobility was largely embraced as a progressive product of modernization, it also came under increasing critique, as we shall see.

**Excursus 1: The Vertical Imperative and the Tyranny of the Skyscraper**

Many of the principles of the new architectural verticality were first explicitly defined by Louis Sullivan in his essay “The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered,” published in the March 1896 issue of *Lippincott’s Magazine*. Crucial to recognize about Sullivan’s influential essay, in contrast to his lesser-known 1891 article on set-back structures, “The High-Building Question,” is the fact that it emphasizes the height of the office building in particular. Rather than residential, civic or religious architecture, it is the increasing demand for commercial or bureaucratic spaces that he insisted was most imperative for the new century.

According to Sullivan’s argument, the necessity for vertical architecture is an inevitable consequence of the “evolution” of social conditions: “The architects of this land and generation are now brought face to face with something new under the sun – namely, that evolution and integration of social conditions, that special grouping of them, that results in a demand for the erection of tall office buildings.”\textsuperscript{215} His essay goes on to argue that it is the mobility and power of “emotion” that drives the vertical push above all: \textsuperscript{216}

> We must now heed the imperative voice of emotion. It demands of us, What is the chief characteristic of the tall office building? And at once we answer, it is lofty. This loftiness is to the artist-nature its thrilling aspect. It is the very open organ-tone in its appeal. It must be in turn the dominant chord in his expression of it, the true excitant of his imagination. It must be tall, every inch of it tall. The force and power of altitude must be in it and the glory and pride of exaltation must be in it. It must be every inch a proud and soaring thing, rising in sheer exultation that from bottom to top it is a unit without a single dissenting line – that it is the

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\textsuperscript{213} Morand, 318.

\textsuperscript{214} Morand also wrote an entire book called *On Speed*, which was published in France the same year as *New York*, and which would later become a major source for Paul Virilio’s theory of “dromology.”


\textsuperscript{216} Le Corbusier would later adopt a similar conception of *architectural emotion* in his 1923 book *Vers une architecture*. “The purpose of construction is TO MAKE THINGS HOLD TOGETHER; of architecture TO MOVE US. Architectural emotion exists when the work rings within us in tune with a universe whose laws we obey, recognize and respect.” Le Corbusier. *Toward a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells (New York: Dover Publications, 1986), 19.
new, the unexpected, the eloquent peroration of most bald, most sinister,most forbidding conditions.217

Instead of appealing to strictly theological concepts to justify his argument, Sullivan suggests that his proud demands for height are actually determined by evolution, “natural law,” and “the Lord of Nature.” He even goes as far as to argue that ignorance of this is nothing less than an example of “human perversity”:

The man who designs in this spirit and with the sense of responsibility to the generation he lives in must be no coward, no denier, no bookworm, no dilettante. He must live of his life and for his life in the fullest, most consummate sense. He must realize at once and with the grasp of inspiration that the problem of the tall office building is one of the most stupendous, one of the most magnificent opportunities that the Lord of Nature in His beneficence has ever offered to the proud spirit of man.

That this has not been perceived – indeed, has been flatly denied – is an exhibition of human perversity that must give us pause.218

Sullivan’s emerging modernism thus comes across as a kind of neo-Romantic celebration of the intimate connections between spiritual nature, cultural inspiration, and aesthetic emotion.219 Although his now famous dictum “form follows function” depends on a primarily naturalist rhetoric of vitalism and organicism, he also appeals to concepts of the inorganic, metaphysical, and “superhuman” as further manifestations of this belief, which he defines as follows:

Whether it be the sweeping eagle in his flight, or the open apple-blossom, the toiling work-horse, the blithe swan, the branching oak, the winding stream at its base, the drifting clouds, over all the coursing sun, *form ever follows function*, and this is the law. Where function does not change form does not change. The granite rocks, the ever-brooding hills, remain for ages; the lightning lives, comes into shape, and dies in a twinkling.

It is the pervading law of all things organic and inorganic, of all things physical and metaphysical, of all things human and all things superhuman, of all true manifestations of the head, of the heart, of the soul, that the life is recognizable in its expression, that form ever follows function.220

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217 Sullivan, 108.
218 Sullivan, 108.
220 Sullivan, 111.
Frank Lloyd Wright would later adapt this organicist theory into his own architectural writings and designs, except that in direct contrast to Sullivan, his concept of “organic architecture” was fundamentally horizontalist in orientation. Wright's most aggressive turn against the verticalism of Sullivan and his followers was first propounded in his 1930 Kahn Lectures at Princeton under the heading, “The Tyranny of the Skyscraper.” Here, he writes of his former mentor (six years after his death):

Our particular invention, the skyscraper, began on our soil when Louis H. Sullivan came through the door that connected my little cubicle with his room in the Auditorium Tower, pushed a drawing board with a stretch of manila paper upon it over onto my table.

There it was, in delicately penciled elevation. I stared at it and sensed what had happened. It was the Wainwright Building – and there was the very first human expression of a tall steel office building as architecture. It was tall and consistently so – a unit, where all before had been one cornice building on top of another cornice building. This was a greater achievement than the Papal dome, I believe, because here was utility become beauty by sheer triumph of imaginative vision.221

After this brief note of appreciation, Wright’s lecture goes on to launch an aggressive attack on the skyscraper and everything it seems to stand for. His primary target is congestion – “as congestion must rapidly increase, metropolitan misery has merely begun”222 – but he also decries dehumanizing development, mechanization, false real estate speculation, “un-American” sensationalism, and capitalist profiteering and hubris:

Today all skyscrapers have been whittled to a point, and a smoking chimney is usually the point. They whistle, they steam, they moor dirigibles, they wave flags, or they merely aspire, and nevertheless very much resemble each other at all points…. Verticality is already stale; vertigo has given way to nausea; perpendicularity is changed by corrugation of various sorts, some wholly crosswise, some crosswise at the sides with perpendicularity at the center, yet all remaining “envelopes.”223

Ultimately, for Wright, this “craze for vertigo and verticality” has come to represent even more hubris than the ancient Tower of Babel:

The human life flowing in an out of all this perpendicularity is to accommodate itself to growth as of potato sprouts in a cellar. Yes – these supermost solutions are seriously proposed to hold and handle landlord


222 Wright, 168.

223 Wright, 179.
profits in a dull craze for verticality and vertigo that concentrates the citizen in an exaggerated super-concentration that would have shocked Babylon – and have made the Tower of Babel itself fall down to the ground and worship.  

Wright’s initial critique of modern verticalization thus invoked ancient religious archetypes just as Léger, Morand and Le Corbusier did in their contemporary essays. Yet while Le Corbusier and his compatriots were awestruck by the heights of American ascendance despite their misgivings, Wright was nonplussed, and maintained his basic stance against the strictly economic logic of the skyscraper throughout his career. “It has no higher ideal of unity than commercial success,” he stated without equivocation. And so he made it his mission to assert the eventual triumph of what he called “horizontal freedom” instead: “It is impossible not to believe that, of necessity, horizontality and the freedom of new beauty will eventually take the place of opportune verticality and senseless stricture.”

Excursus 2: Manhattan Transfer

“I’ve always been a frustrated architect,” John Dos Passos once admitted in an interview toward the end of his life, but at the height of his career in 1932, he made a much more bold assertion about the spatial prowess to which he aspired: “A writer who writes straight is the architect of history.” Although he may not have succeeded in creating his idea of a “new clean construction,” much of his writing attempts to establish close connections between urban architectural development and spatial forms of historiography. This is evinced perhaps best toward the end of The Big Money, the third volume of his expansive USA Trilogy, where Dos Passos profiles Frank Lloyd Wright as a “preacher in blueprints” who represents the transition from a European past to an American future:

The son and grandson of preachers, he became a preacher in blueprints,

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224 Wright, 169.
225 Le Corbusier also cited the figure of the Tower of Babel in particular six years later: “A thousand feet of height, in stone, steel and glass, standing up in the magnificently blue sky of New York, is a new event in human history which up to now had only a legend on that theme: that of the Tower of Babel.” In Le Corbusier, When the Cathedrals Were White (London: Routledge, 1947), 45. In the original French: Quand les cathédrales étaient blanches (Denoël / Gonther, 1983).
227 Wright, 178. See my chapter “The Vertigo of Verticality: Alfred Hitchcock and the Displacement of Terror” for a discussion of how Wright developed his critique of verticality in response to World War II and the emergence of the atomic age.
projecting construction in the American future instead of the
European past.
Inventor of plans,
plotter of tomorrow’s girderwork phrases,
he preaches to the young men coming of age in the time of
oppression….229

In this lyric portrait, Wright appears as a pseudo-secular reincarnation of his religious
European forbears, and his vision of “an American future,” inspired by the calm, flat prairies
of his Midwestern youth, is a distinctly horizontalist one:

He preaches
The horizons of his boyhood,
A future that is not the rise of a few points in a hundred selected
stocks, or an increase in loadings, or a multiplication of credit in the bank
or a rise in the rate on call money,
But a new clean construction, from the ground up, based on uses and
needs,
Towards an American future instead of towards the pain-smeared
past of Europe and Asia.230

In his earlier 1925 novel Manhattan Transfer, Dos Passos developed a much more
pointed critique of the triumphalist myths and catastrophic realities of American
metropolitan life. “Why does everyone want to succeed?” Stan asks Jimmy halfway through
the novel. “I’d like to meet somebody who wanted to fail. That’s the only sublime thing.”231
The question remains open, including what “success” really means in the first place, but the
point, several years before the stock market crash of 1929, suggests an appeal to an idea of
catastrophe similar to that which would emerge in much of the French writings that
followed soon after.

Perhaps this is because Dos Passos’ aesthetic and political perspective is in many
ways more akin to French tastes than to those of his American compatriots. In contrast to
Sullivan, Wright and many “New Deal modernists”232 who kept their distance from Europe,
as well as adventurous or cosmopolitan Americans like Henry James, Gertrude Stein, Ernest
Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, who didn’t engage much with European language and
literature despite their ex-pat lifestyles, Dos Passos developed a close connection to Europe
at an early age. While still in grade school, he traveled from England through the
Mediterranean to the Middle East with a private tutor, and then after his undergraduate years
at Harvard, he studied art and architecture in Spain, served in France and Italy during World
War I (most notably working as a driver in Paris), and then stayed on to study at the
Sorbonne after the war was over. Years later he also worked on translations from the

230 Dos Passos, The Big Money, 344.
232 Szalay, Michael. New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State (Durham:
French, and in 1931 translated one of the first English-language publications of the Swiss poet Blaise Cendrars (specifically, his 1918 book *Panama: ou les aventures de mes sept oncles*). Some eight years before Jean-Paul Sartre dubbed Dos Passos “the greatest writer of our time” in the conclusion to his essay on *1919*, Paul Morand quoted directly from *Manhattan Transfer* while discussing the rise of anti-immigrant sentiments in the city. And like Léger, who collaborated with the American composer George Antheil on the 1924 avant-garde film *Ballet Mecanique*, Dos Passos was fascinated by emergent forms of cinema. In contrast to earlier modernists like Gertrude Stein, who claimed that the composition of her 1903 novel *Three Lives* was inspired by a Paul Cézanne painting that she owned and admired, Dos Passos turned away from the painterly and photographic in favor of the cinematographic. This is especially apparent in his *USA* trilogy, in which chapters are framed by “kino-eyes,” and the prose is continuously interrupted by a montage of transliterated newsreel footage and “motion pictures.” Such cinematographic techniques are somewhat more subtle in *Manhattan Transfer*, but this novel also pays close attention to problems of mobility through poetic forms of montage and focalization that are comparable to contemporary developments in film.

Like Morand, Léger and Le Corbusier, Dos Passos is also drawn to compare the verticality of modern New York with many ancient European and Middle Eastern precursors, including Babylon. For example, in the poetic opening to the novel’s second chapter, entitled simply “Metropolis,” we read:

There were Babylon and Nineveh; they were built of brick. Athens was gold marble columns. Rome was held up on broad arches of rubble. In Constantinople the minarets flame like great candles round the Golden Horn…Steel, glass, tile, concrete will be the materials of the skyscrapers. Crammed on the narrow island the millionwindowed building will jut glittering, pyramid on pyramid like the white cloudhead above a thunderstorm.

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233 This was published by Harper and Brothers as *Panama, or the Adventures of My Seven Uncles*. For more on the connection between these two writers, see Jutta Ernst’s essay “Transatlantic Simultaneity: John Dos Passos and Blaise Cendrars,” in Martens, Klaus, ed. *Pioneering North America: Mediators of European Culture and Literature* (Wurzburg: Verlag Königshausen & Neumann, 2000), 100-112. As I discuss in chapter 1, Cendrars had already spent time in New York himself, and his 1912 poem “Les Pâques à New York” was likely an important model for Apollinaire’s “Zone,” written later that same year.


235 Morand, 35-6: In this early part of the twentieth century, those who were welcome yesterday have become undesirables, and the United States argues like the old fisherman in *Manhattan Transfer*:

“I’d give a million dollars to know what they came for.”

“Just for that, pop,’ said the young man who sat in the stern. “Ain’t it the land of oporootunity?”

“One thing I do know,” said the old man. “When I was a boy it was wild Irish came in the spring with the first run of shad…Now there ain’t no more shad, an’ them folks, Lord knows where they came from.”

“It’s the land of oporootunity.”

236 Morand, 12.
In turn, Dos Passos appeals to the eschatological, apocalyptic or catastrophic in representing New York, and at one point specifically defines it as “the city of destruction.” In one particularly suggestive scene, we come upon a girl who has just destroyed a building she had constructed out of paper, to which her mother responds:

Ellen you should always mind when mummy speaks to you, and dear you shouldn’t be destructive. It costs money to make that paper and people worked on it and daddy went out to buy it and he hasn’t finished reading it yet. Ellie understands dont she now? We need con-struction and not de-striuction in this world.

This call for “con-struction” appears to be a kind of motto for much of Dos Passos’ work; for unlike his contemporary French critics, he was ultimately more invested in the persistence of American development than its apparent potential for ruin. In this sense his epic imagination couldn’t be more different from the “tragic muse” of Henry James, who imagined urban development in *The American Scene* as “new landmarks crushing the old quite as violent children stamp on snails and caterpillars.”

The title *Manhattan Transfer* suggests a much more mobile and enigmatic vision. Although it sounds simple and direct, the actual meaning of “transfer” remains surprisingly open-ended. Transportation is surely paramount, as the novel highlights the importance of common vehicles, including ferries, trains, and automobiles, as well as more unique means of modern mobility, such as revolving doors, blimps, rollercoasters, fire engines and steamrollers. Each one moves people across distances or through boundaries and thereby transfers them from one place to another.

The novel opens with a scene that closely resembles the beginning of the Whitmanesque film *Manahatta*, which Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler produced four years earlier in 1921. While their black-and-white cinematography frames the image of a crowd standing on the deck of a ferry that is gradually nearing its dock, in Dos Passos’ novel, the scene of the approaching ferry is focalized through a single character named Bud Korpenning, who promptly asks a young man, “Say, friend, how fur is it into the city from where this ferry lands?” After being told that it depends on where he wants to go, he...

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237 Dos Passos, 366.
238 Dos Passos, 18
239 Fernand Léger also describes the approach to New York by ferry in his essay of 1931: “Le paquebot, au ralenti, déplace doucement les perspectives; on cherche la statue de la Liberté, le cadeau de la France; c’est une petite statuette modeste, oubliée au milieu du port devant ce nouveau continent audacieux et vertical.” Like Léger, who collaborated with the American composer George Antheil on the 1924 avant-garde film *Ballet Mécanique*, Dos Passos was fascinated by emergent forms of cinema. In contrast to earlier modernists like Gertrude Stein, who claimed that the composition of her 1903 novel *Three Lives* was inspired by a Paul Cézanne painting that she owned and admired, Dos Passos turned away from the painterly and photographic in favor of the cinematographic. This is especially apparent in his *USA* trilogy, in which chapters are framed by “kino-eyes,” and the prose is continuously interrupted by a montage of transliterated newsreel footage and “motion pictures.” Although such cinematographic techniques are much more subtle and undeveloped in *Manhattan Transfer*, this novel also focuses on problems of mobility through forms of poetic montage and visual description that are comparable to contemporary developments in film media.
explains his goal precisely in the novel’s most famous line of dialogue: “How do I get to Broadway?...I want to get to the center of things.” The young man gives him clear directions, but it quickly becomes evident that Bud is in search of much more: his real quest is for a job, something he can’t seem to find on Broadway or anywhere else. The novel slips into the first person voice – “If I could git more in the center of things” – as he continues to explore the winding streets of Lower Manhattan. When he comes upon another young man, he asks again where he might be able to find a job. This time he is told to head down Broadway toward City Hall, to which he asks again, “Is that kinder the center of things?” “Sure it is,” the man answers, mocking him, “An then you go upstairs and ask the Mayor....”

The trope of “the center” continues to recur throughout the novel as characters search for jobs or “big money,” but in the end each search appears to be continually deferred, detoured, and rendered “off-center.” We soon learn that there is no real “center of things” at all, as this idealized motif is ultimately revealed to be something imaginary, unlocatable, and hence unattainable (much like “the Law” in the famous parable from Franz Kafka’s novel *The Trial*, which was also published in 1925). Thus, although the power of this globalizing city is represented in terms of gravitational attraction or centripetal pull, it also produces centrifugal forces of abjection and vertigo that render its inhabitants unable to navigate any clear path or direction: “The terrible thing about having New York go stale on

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240 Dos Passos, 4.
you is that there’s nowhere else. It’s the top of the world. All we can do is go round and
round in a squirrel cage.” While the novel opens with Bud’s attempt to find big money in
the center of things, already by the fifth chapter, entitled “Steamroller,” he has become a
Bowery Bum, and ultimately decides to give up on the American dream by jumping off the
Brooklyn Bridge. And so, just as Septimus Warren Smith’s traumatic shell shock prevented
from participating in the aspirational fantasies of the postwar period in Woolf’s Mrs.
Dalloway, Bud becomes a victim of metropolitan capitalism rather than a beneficiary of its
postwar boom.

Dos Passos develops his most explicit contrast between the dizzying experience of
urban displacement on the ground and the vertical streetscape that towers above them in the
chapter called “Skyscraper” toward the end of the novel. In the poetic introductory vignette
that opens the chapter, we find an unnamed, presumably homeless man who is forced to
carry himself on his arms because he no longer has any legs to stand on:

The young man without legs has stopped still in the middle of the south sidewalk of
Fourteenth Street. He wears a blue knitted sweater and a blue stocking cap. His eyes
staring up widen until they fill the paperwhite face. Drifts across the sky a dirigible, bright
tinfoil cigar misted with height, gently prodding the rainwashed sky and the soft clouds. The
young man without legs stops still propped on his arms in the middle of the south sidewalk
of Fourteenth Street. Among striding legs, lean legs, waddling legs, legs in skirts and pants
and knickerbockers, he stops perfectly still, propped on his arms, looking up at the
dirigible.

The irony of this scene is cruel: while the dirigible floats overhead with its “gentle” lightness
and height, the man without legs is forced to carry his weight with his arms as he subsists on
the hard surface of the ground. The “misted” and “rainwashed sky” and the “soft clouds”
stand out with ethereal charm in contrast to the material sense of dirt and grime that we
imagine the man’s bare hands must contend with on the concrete. Although he can look up
and fantasize about what soars above him – the dirigible figured as a luxurious and seductive
cigar – his urban wandering is represented as an inability to rise up or strive higher: his
movements are strictly lateral, without any possibility of upward mobility. He remains still on
the south side of Fourteenth Street, a dividing line between what was then the established
downtown center and the emerging development further uptown to the north, with his eye
level fixed at other people’s legs rather than their heads. In this position, his turning upward
to the dreamy world above thus appears as an aspirational turning away from the grim reality
around him.

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241 Dos Passos, 220.
242 Dos Passos, 351.
243 By contrast, as I discuss in my chapter “Vertical Wandering,” Saul Bellow’s Dangling Man and
Thomas Pynchon’s V. both represent the experience of wandering (either in the city or across the expanse of
the globe) through explicitly vertical metaphors of upward and downward oscillation. Unlike many of their
modernist predecessors, these post-World War II metropolitan novels reject the idea of ascent as a means of
escape, transcendence, or progress.
From here the chapter opens with Jimmy Herf, arguably the character Dos Passos identified with most, emerging from the now-demolished Pulitzer Building, headquarters of the once-prominent *New York World* newspaper. Having just given up his job as a reporter, he stands for a moment beside a pile of pink newspapers in the street and looks up at the skyscrapers overhead. After his gaze settles upon the “glistening shaft of the Woolworth” and he starts walking uptown, his perception of the building changes along with his position in the street: “as he got away from it the Woolworth pulled out like a telescope. He walked north though the city of shiny windows, through the city of scrambled alphabets, through the city of gilt letter signs.”244 As he begins to walk uptown, images of newspaper headlines stick out in his mind like snippets from a Cubist collage while urban space becomes distorted and stretched around him, distance becomes telescoped outward, and language becomes garbled in a manner similar to what David Harvey has called “time-space compression” and Anthony Vidler has called “the architectural uncanny.” For Jimmy, like the man without legs, the aimlessness of urban life is experienced not simply at the level of the ground, but with a constant consciousness of vertical height: “Life was upside down, he was a fly walking on the ceiling of a topsy-turvy city. He’d thrown up his job, he had nothing to do today, tomorrow, next day, day after. Whatever goes up comes down, but not for weeks, months.”245

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244 Dos Passos, John. *Manhattan Transfer*, 351.
245 Dos Passos, 352.
In this way, Dos Passos not only shows us that space, distance and movement have been radically transformed by twentieth-century urbanization, but that verticality has become its dominant image. When one of his hapless heroes admits with defeated exasperation, “Kerist I wish I was a skyscraper,” we are led to recognize that these new symbols of upward mobility also stood for the inaccessibility of power and success. While the novel begins with a turn-of-the-century newspaper headline declaring New York as “the world’s second metropolis,” Dos Passos suggests that, by the 1920s, it had already become the preeminent center of the global imagination. However, as he also recognizes, this global centralization produced not only flows of horizontal circulation but also structures of vertical stratification; not only ambition, hope and accumulation, but also anxiety, despair, and loss.

Yet the question remains: is it fair to call Dos Passos’ metropolis a “global city,” as we have come to use the term today, or would New York have to wait until after the Second World War, or later, to merit this title? According to Saskia Sassen, the key difference between the “world city hypothesis” pioneered by John Friedmann and Goetz Wolff and her theory of the “global city” is as follows: “The world city concept has a kind of timelessness attached to it where the global city model marks a specific socio-spatial historic phase.... It is not simply a matter of global coordination but one of the production of global control capacities.” This distinction still seems rather undeveloped to me, especially considering the ambiguity about how and when this production is to be historicized. However, by considering the centripetal and centrifugal forces of New York as globalizing rather than essentially global, it should be clear that Dos Passos saw nothing timeless about it.

Le Corbusier’s Catastrophism

While Americans like Dos Passos and Wright remained critical of the new skyscraper boom, Le Corbusier’s famous response to New York was: “The skyscrapers are too small!” When asked what he meant by this, he explained that they should both be taller as well as fewer in number in order to alleviate the awful congestion that was already ruining the city. Thus from the perspective of this Swiss-born French architect, the verticalization of the twentieth-century American city represented both a model to be imitated as well as a catastrophic error to be avoided.

The cathedral, especially the enigmatic notion of the “white cathedral,” was Le Corbusier’s central motif for comparing pre-industrial Old Europe to twentieth-century New York. In his 1946 preface to the English-language edition of When the Cathedrals Were White, he declared that the booming secular architecture of New York City was reminiscent of both

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246 Dos Passos, 252.
the “skyscrapers of God” from the French Middle Ages (presumably once gleaming but now blackened by modern industrial smoke and soot), and the much older, white temples of ancient Greece and Rome:

The cathedrals belong to France, and Manhattan is American. What a good opportunity to consider this fresh, twenty-year-old city against the background of one’s awareness of the skyscrapers of God. This new place in the world, New York, examined by a heart full of the sap of the Middle Ages. Middle Ages? That is where we are today: the world to be put in order, to be put in order on piles of debris, as was done once before on the debris of antiquity, when the cathedrals were white.\(^{249}\)

For Le Corbusier, New York represented a kind of medieval revival because it was emerging as a replacement for the decay of European heritage just as the Middle Ages established the edifices of Christian culture as replacements for the temples of pagan antiquity. According to this perspective, then, New York was implicitly developing a durable and impressive civilization, but one which nonetheless had a long way to go before it would reach its Renaissance and become truly modern.

But why were the cathedrals white, and how was this similar to the new steel and glass architecture of the American skyscraper? Le Corbusier argues as follows:

The cathedrals were white because they were new. The cities were new…..Above all the cities and towns encircled by new walls, the skyscrapers of God dominated the countryside. They had made them as high as possible, extraordinarily high. It may seem a disproportion in the ensemble. Not at all, it was an act of optimism, a gesture of courage, a sign of pride, a proof of mastery! In addressing themselves to God, men did not sign their own abdication.\(^{250}\)

Apparently there was something wonderful and progressive about this otherwise naïve period, according to Le Corbusier, for even if the ascendance and establishment of Christian culture didn’t fully achieve its enthusiastic aspirations, it nonetheless pointed to the possibility for universal thought and love:

When the cathedrals were white, above nationalities concerned with themselves, there was a common idea: Christendom was above everything else. Already, before constructing everywhere the naves of the new civilization, a common enthusiasm of spirit had brought together the peoples of modern times and had led them, through strange avatars, toward Jerusalem, where there was the seat of a universal thought: love.\(^{251}\)

\(^{249}\) Le Corbusier, *When The Cathedrals Were White*, xxii.

\(^{250}\) Le Corbusier, 4.

\(^{251}\) Le Corbusier, 32.
According to this apparently post-Christian conception of history, the faith in Christian love as a universal idea, originating in Jerusalem but rising “above everything else” worked to unify various nationalities despite the differences and distances that otherwise separated them. Now that this universal idea no longer inspires the same enthusiasm, he suggests, new forms of secular architecture are rising up in the image of the cathedrals of Christendom. For him, this modernist spirit was not simply a celebration of the new, however, but also an effusive nostalgia for the disappearing Christian fantasy of universalism.

Le Corbusier, collage for “Descartes est-il américain?”
(In Bacon, 135)

Le Corbusier goes on to bring this fantasy to bear on the present by focusing on American ascendance directly under such headings as “New York, Vertical City,” “I’m an American!” and “Enchanted Catastrophe.” His brash, ironic tone leaves it open to debate whether he actually believes that New York represents the legendary time “when the cathedrals were white” or not. For instance, at first he tells us, “I wish to show only the great similarity between that past time and the present day. The cathedrals of our own time have
not yet been built.” But then, a few pages later, he declares, “There are in the world, in Manhattan, new white cathedrals.” And so the reader is left wondering: which are we to believe?

What is clear is that, for him, New York is both vertical and catastrophic, while French attitudes toward modern development are comparably more measured. Apparently attempting to rise above both, Le Corbusier argues for embracing the new heights of American achievements in engineering while at the same time maintaining the continuity of European centrality. “I cannot forget New York, a vertical city, now that I had the happiness of seeing it there, raised up in the sky,” he admits in no uncertain terms. Having returned to Paris, he finds that the city has apparently lost the global centrality it once claimed: “When I am in the Place de l’Opéra in Paris, am I in the navel of the world? No, it’s finished; I feel myself far away, elsewhere, and the world has also abandoned this center which is no longer anything but the ghost of a spent civilization. His critique of French decline thus suggests an affinity with the Nietzschean appeal to German ascendance, as both represent the vertical will to power as a spirited repudiation of gravity and measure:

Yes! Let us recognize that America has given us that sensation: magnitude [la dimension] which is noble, which can be very noble, as it often was in the past. Imagine the white cathedrals in an incompletely finished world, erect, straight, above the small houses. We have no right to inveigh against magnitude. We have no right to fall back on an egoism based on laziness and invoke “measure” [“la mesure”]. We did not come to the USA to look for measure, but to look for conviction and enthusiasm [l’élan]. Our European wearinesses require a tonic.

Le Corbusier’s persistent appeal to the figure of the “white cathedral” may thus be read as a defensive reminder that vertical power was not only originally European, but may become so again: “When the cathedrals were white, no one thought that height was the sign of a degeneration of the spirit.”

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252 Le Corbusier, 56.
253 Le Corbusier, 38. Later, he writes further: “Within the ring of its docks Manhattan thrusts itself up into the sky. A great many skyscrapers fill the space, shut off the horizon. I did not imagine that there were so many of them; I imagined a few examples of boldness and vanity. But the whole city is vertical – or at least it seems to be, for a limited number of verticals succeed in taking up the blue of the sky.” Le Corbusier, 88.
254 Le Corbusier, 213.
255 Le Corbusier, 77.
256 Le Corbusier, 68.
It should be clear by now why the verticality of New York was so inspiring to Le Corbusier despite his defense of Eurocentrism, but it remains mysterious why he also saw the city as “a catastrophe.” He begins his explanation as follows:

New York is a vertical city, under the sign of the new times. It is a catastrophe with which a too hasty destiny has overwhelmed courageous and confident people, though a beautiful and worthy catastrophe. Nothing is lost. Faced with difficulties, New York falters. Still streaming with sweat from its exertions, wiping off its forehead, it sees what it has done and suddenly realizes: “Well, we didn’t get it done properly. Let’s start over again!” New York has such courage and enthusiasm that everything can be begun again, sent back to the building yard and made into something still greater, something mastered.²⁵⁷

Here the appeal to idea of catastrophe suggests a kind of cyclical, cathartic process rather than a singular, definitive event – that is, destruction leading to reconstruction and renewal.

²⁵⁷ Le Corbusier, 36.
rather than simply ending in ruin. In addition to the Nietzschean appeal to the Dionyssean spirit of tragedy, this architectural theory of history as a process of building, destruction and rebuilding may be compared to the Catastrophism of Georges Cuvier, who opposed the gradualist evolutionary theories of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and his followers by arguing that geological history develops above all as a result of natural catastrophe.258 (This rhetoric of geological catastrophism would later become especially prominent in the representations of New York by Claude Lévi-Straus and Jean-Paul Sartre, as I discuss later).

Recalling the metaphorics of lightness and weight in Nietzsche’s Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Le Corbusier develops an extended metaphor of an acrobat performing on a fairground swing in order to further explain his theoretical distinction between the measured “harmony” that leads to success and the precarious “gravity” that leads to catastrophe. Under the heading, “I am an American!” he writes:

In the domain of money, the law is like that of the swing at the fair: at the beginning the effort is normal; everyone can take off and make a start. But at a certain point in the swing, when the acrobat is on the horizontal, it becomes precarious; he is too far away from the gravitational norm, and gravity [le pesanetur] acts on him. Then it takes an effort of a very particular kind to achieve a vertical position, with head down, and having passed the ‘meridian’ of the swing, to come on around effortlessly from that point. Brute strength is not enough. The repeated attempts require a regular and harmonious progression. Harmonious, that’s the word. Harmony is the cause of the success. The most difficult thing – the real difficulty – comes when you are a hair’s-breadth from success: at the moment of swinging over. If you manage it, you are thenceforth launched! Many will not succeed in managing it. Those who have passed over this financial hazard [ce cap de l’argent] owe it to their merits just as they owe it to the combination of circumstances: the things necessary to make the effort profitable, to stimulate it, to support it, were present. It was a happy conjuncture. And now the financial swing moves easily, with no further effort required except a scrupulous supervision.259

According to this analogy, the swing stands for “the law” of money, and the acrobat’s attempt to turn from the horizontal to the vertical position represents the economy’s potential for financial success, balance, or downfall. In turn, gravity is what makes the horizontal position precarious, and harmony is the cause of vertical success. While there is a level of both chance and merit to this harmonious upward mobility, once it is achieved, it remains easy and stable save for a “scrupulous supervision” or, in French, surveillance. In this sense, Le Corbusier’s suggests that a certain view from above is always necessary for the

258 There is some speculation that Cuvier developed this theory in response to his personal experience of the French Revolution as a simultaneously catastrophic and progressive event. See, for example, Martin Rudwick’s conclusion to Georges Cuvier, Fossil Bones, and Geological Catastrophes: New Translations and Interpretations of the Primary Texts, Martin Rudwick, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998)

259 Le Corbusier, 41.
preservation of economic harmony and growth (a kind of surveillance that Foucault would later conceptualize in much more critical terms in his analogy between the Panopticon prison and disciplinary society).

It is according to a related metaphor of “the lever of hope” [le levier de l’espoir] that Le Corbusier ultimately defines his concept of the “enchanted catastrophe” at the end of this chapter. As he explains, the phrase was inspired by the title of a Christmas album he saw on display in the store windows along the streets of New York:

In the store windows I saw an album published for the Christmas season by Scribner’s: The Magical City. I reflect and argue with myself. I change it to: The Enchanted Catastrophe. That is the phrase that expresses my emotion and rings within me in the stormy debate which has not stopped tormenting me for fifty days: hate and love. For me the enchanted catastrophe is the lever of hope.

This metaphor of the “lever of hope” suggests the power of both mobility and uplift. While the idea of hope appears quasi-religious, especially considering its association the Christmas season, it is counter-balanced by the mundane and mechanical trope of the lever. Working from below, it is a terrestrial, grounded version of Le Corbusier’s other metaphor of New York as an “open hand,” which appears later in the text like an American incarnation of Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” of capitalism: “New York, strong, proud of itself, in prosperity or in depression, is like an open hand above our heads. An open hand which tries to knead the substance of today.”

Le Corbusier, however, is too much of a catastrophist to uphold a laissez-faire faith in economic providence (or Christian providence). He also makes it clear that the view from above is not necessarily a pretty one, and that the capitalist forces of New York do not necessarily lead to positive effects at all. Considering the extreme levels of inequality, stratification, and waste that the city has produced alongside its apparent wealth and prosperity, he writes:

From a plane you can grasp more clearly the wretchedness of urban agglomerations and particularly the calamity in the lives of millions of Americans who are thrust into the purgatory of the transportation system. You get the idea of catastrophe, urban catastrophe – the harassed life of men, women, and children; the sections in which human wastes stagnate – the poor devils so battered by their situation that they do not have the mind, the strength, the power, or the means to get together and cry halt.


261 Le Corbusier, 91 (translation amended from “The Fairy Catastrophe”).

262 Le Corbusier, 83.

263 Le Corbusier, 86. Compare this to Simone de Beauvoir’s more romantic aerial vision of New York when arriving by plane, quoted below.
In this way, Le Corbusier recognizes that vertical height does not simply entail power or greatness, but can also reveal the segregation of the upwardly mobile from the “stagnating,” depressed, or oppressed who are pushed to the margins or base levels of society. After World War II, centrifugal forces of ghettoization and suburbanization would push both middle-class and working-class residents out of the centers of cities, which would come to appear increasingly oriented toward business and entertainment rather than habitation. As we shall see, later French visitors to New York – including Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Michel de Certeau – would continue to be attracted by the gravitational pull of the city despite their beliefs in its potentially catastrophic nature.

**The Geopolitical Turn: Lévi-Strauss**

Claude Lévi-Strauss did not publish his essay “New York in 1941” until 1977, when it appeared in the catalogue for one of the first exhibitions at the Pompidou Center, entitled “Paris-New York,” which documented literary and aesthetic connections between the two cities throughout the twentieth century. Writing from a reflective historical distance, he adopts a tone of wonder and surprise about the period he spent in New York during the World War II and the German occupation of France. After accepting a position at the New School in Greenwich Village soon after his fieldwork in Brazil from 1935 to 1939, he became one of the founding members of the École Libre des Hautes Études, a French and Belgian university-in-exile, funded largely by the Rockefeller Foundation, which also included Roman Jakobson, Jean Wahl, and Jacques Maritain, among others. (After World War II it migrated back to Paris, where it eventually evolved into the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales).

Lévi-Strauss’s essay represents a significant shift away from the travel writing of his inter-war predecessors not only because he wrote it with the hindsight of World War II, but because he turns to natural history rather than religious history, and to cross-cultural perspectives rather than specifically European or Christian models, in order to represent the unique alterity of New York. Gone are the historical comparisons to Christian cathedrals and ancient Greek temples, which weighed so heavily on the inter-war writings of Morand, Léger, and Le Corbusier. In Lévi Strauss’s essay on New York, as in the post-war travel writings of Sartre, Beauvoir and Certeau, we find new appeals to a somewhat ironic anthropological perspective in order to contend with the alternative modernity of the American metropolis.

Lévi-Strauss begins his essay by comparing New York to the tropics, and refers to the adventurous and precarious trip he took to get there as if it were akin to his travels to South America:

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Disembarking in New York in May 1941, one felt oneself bathed in tropical moisture – a foreshadowing of one of those humid, stifling summers that forced the writer to wrap his arm in a Turkish towel so that his sweat would not soak the paper. Being able to spend hours walking and exploring the city in light clothing increased one’s sense of freedom – a feeling understandable in one who had just managed to reach the United States after a laborious passage that had not been without risk. 265

He then admits directly, “New York was decidedly not the ultra-modern metropolis I had expected.” Instead, for this urban explorer, the buildings appeared more like natural “upheavals” than architectural constructions. Georges Cuvier’s rhetoric of geological Catastrophism, which first appeared to surface in the writing of Le Corbusier, returns here in full force: in Lévi-Strauss’s words, the “fantastic cliffs” of architecture loomed over the “chasms” of avenues like an “immense horizontal and vertical disorder attributable to some spontaneous upheaval of the urban crust.” He continues:

Here, mineral strata, ancient or recent, were still intact in spots; while elsewhere peaks emerged from the surrounding magma like witnesses to different eras which followed one another at an accelerated rhythm with, at intervals, the still visible remnants of all those upheavals: vacant lots, incongruous cottages, hovels, red-brick buildings – the latter already empty shells slated for demolition. 266

He later refers to Le Corbusier directly when describing the skyscrapers of New York, but in representing their monumental power, he places his emphasis less on the heights themselves than on the dark, labyrinthine passages and sharp edges that they produce:

Despite the loftiness of the tallest buildings and the way they were piled up and squeezed together on the cramped surface of an island (“This city that awaits you standing up,” said Le Corbusier), I discovered that, on the edges of these labyrinths, the web of the urban tissue was astonishingly slack – as has been proved by all that has been wedged in since and that increases my sense of oppression every time I visit New York. 267

Despite these fanciful, neo-romantic musings on urban disaster, Lévi-Strauss admits that he is basically awestruck by the sublimity of New York, suggesting that it is ironically the city’s very catastrophic nature that has created its sense of modern possibility, which it ultimately ended up exporting back to Europe after the war. As he explains, the American commodification of imagined freedom through mass culture worked to “bury” the variety of older cultural forms existing alongside it:

265 Lévi-Strauss, *View From Afar*, 258.
266 Lévi-Strauss, 258.
Naturally, we sensed that all these relics were being assaulted by a mass culture that was about to crush and bury them— a mass culture that, already far advanced in America, would reach Europe a few decades later. This may be the reason so many aspects of life in New York enthralled us: it set before our eyes a list of recipes thanks to which, in a society becoming each day ever more oppressive and inhuman, the people who find it decidedly intolerable can learn the thousand and one tricks offered, for a few brief moments, by the illusion that one has the power to escape.\footnote{Lévi-Strauss, 267.}

A number of times throughout his essay, Lévi-Strauss admits his fascination with the simultaneous co-existence of cultural forms from a variety of periods and places (a situation Ernst Bloch conceptualized as “non-simultaneity” [\textit{Ungleichzeitigkeit}] in theoretical writings from the early 1930s.\footnote{See especially Bloch, Ernst. “Summary Transition: Non-Contemporaneity and Obligation to Its Dialectic” and “The Problem of a Multi-Layered Dialectic” in \textit{Heritage of Our Times} (Polity Press, 1990)\textsuperscript{269}} Apparently Lévi-Strauss found this more apparent in post-war New York than anywhere else in his travels. And it is no doubt the desire the unearth the “relics” buried by mass culture that prompted his frequent visits to antique shops, which, as he tells us, he made with fellow European exiles Max Ernst, Andre Breton, and Georges Duthuit. This kind of “salvage ethnography” was largely nostalgic, however, as it was increasingly becoming clear that post-war American mass culture would ultimately triumph over the variety of other cultures that were becoming incorporated into its growing empire. “Thus,” he concludes, “New York offered simultaneously the image of a world already finished in Europe and the image of another world that—little as we suspected then—would soon invade Europe.”\footnote{Lévi-Strauss, 262.\textsuperscript{270}}

\textbf{Under the Whole World’s Sky: Sartre}

It was soon after this American “invasion” of Europe that Jean-Paul Sartre first crossed the Atlantic and pronounced: “New York is about to acquire a History and […] already possesses its ruins.”\footnote{Quoted above, note 15} Sartre was born and raised for the most part in Paris, and although he spent some years away, either teaching in Le Havre, Laon or Neuilly, studying in Berlin, or serving in the army and being captured as a prisoner of war, the gravitational pull of the French capital kept him there for most of his life as an independent writer. After World War II, however, Sartre came to recognize that not only was Paris in ruins along with the rest of Europe, but that another city had emerged as an alternative cultural capital for the twentieth century. In a series of three travel essays first published between 1945 and 1946, and then collected for the 1949 publication of \textit{Situations III: Lendemains de guerre}, Sartre took it upon himself to come to terms with the ascendant power of the United States, and of New York City in particular. Presumably modeling his essays on the nineteenth-century critiques of de Tocqueville and Baudelaire, and twentieth-century predecessors like Morand and Céline, Sartre’s essays focus above all on the meaning and location of modern culture after
World War II. He found what he was looking for above all in New York, which he came to grudgingly admire as a pivotal, towering city around which the whole world would be increasingly compelled to turn.

Sartre (who stood under five feet tall, it should perhaps be noted) was especially interested in the vertical topography of New York, and in this way he was much like those who preceded him. But what also impressed him was what he repeatedly referred to as the “lightness” [légerete] of American cities in general. This word stands out in stark contrast to the dark and heavy atmosphere of his previous writings, especially the depiction of the fictional Bouville as a heavy, melancholic city of existential angst in his 1938 novel La Nausée. Behind this newfound motif of American lightness is the implication that, while French society had become burdened by the traumatic experience of war, occupation, and collaboration, New York had risen up out of the ruins of history with the levity of certain victory.

Sartre’s first travel essay, on “Individualism and Conformism in the United States,” argues that American universalism includes both of these ideologies as complementary, whereas French universalism views them as fundamentally opposed. “For us,” he explains, individualism has retained the old, classical form of “the individual’s struggle against society and, more particularly, against the state.” There is no question of this in America…It is “their” state, an expression of “their” nation; they have both a profound respect for it and a proprietary love.

After setting up this distinction, he goes on to explain it in terms of the spatial topography of New York: while the city’s horizontal axis represents its conformist adherence to the geometry of the “chequerboard,” its vertical axis reveals “the triumph of individualism” in its defiance of limitation and regulation. In this way, he defines American individualism as a new direction, a third dimension of vertical height and depth, which provides room for cultural variation to emerge out of the nation’s otherwise dominant homogeneity and flatness:

If you merely walk about in New York for a few days you cannot fail to notice the deep link between American conformism and American individuality. Seen flat on the ground from the point of length and width, New York is the most conformist city in the world. From Washington Square north, there is not a single oblique or curving street, with the exception of Old Broadway. A dozen long, parallel furrows go straight from the tip of Manhattan to the

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272 By contrast, his Chemins de la liberté novels were devoted mainly to the few years leading up to the German occupation of France in 1940. The first in the series, L’âge de raison (The Age of Reason), was published in 1945, the same year that Sartre published his first two travel essays in Le Figaro. The second, Le sursis (The Reprieve), was published in 1947, and La mort dans l’âme (Troubled Sleep) was published in 1949. Two chapters of his planned fourth novel, to be called La dernière chance (The Last Chance) were published in Les temps modernes, but it was otherwise left unfinished.

Harlem River. These are the avenues, which are intersected by hundreds of smaller furrows rigorously perpendicular to them.

This chequerboard is New York. The streets look so much alike that they have not been named. They have merely been given registration numbers, like soldiers.

But if you look up, everything changes. Seen in its height, New York is the triumph of individualism. The tops of the buildings defy all the rules of town planning. They have twenty-seven, fifty-five and a hundred stories. They are grey, brown or white, Moorish, medieval, renaissance or modern. On lower Broadway, they press against each other, dwarfing the tiny black churches, and then, suddenly, they separate, leaving between them a gaping hole of light. Seen from Brooklyn they seem to have the nobility and solitude of bouquets of palm trees on the banks of rivers in Moroccan Susa – bouquets of skyscrapers which the eye is always trying to assemble and which are always coming undone.

Thus, at first, American Individualism seemed liked a third dimension. It is not incompatible with conformism, but, on the contrary, implies it. It represents, however, a new direction, both in height and depth, within conformism.

After critiquing American conformism as a “constant appeal to reason, civic sense and freedom,” Sartre concludes that it is in fact through this very process that the American is “subjected” [soumis] to Americanization, which in turn paradoxically enables “his consciousness of himself and his personal autonomy.” Again returning to the skyscraper analogy, as well the Nietzschean idea of self-transcendent levity that we found in the rhetoric of Le Corbusier, he concludes that it is due to these appeals that the American becomes “free to escape into an almost Nietzschean individualism, the kind symbolized by the skyscrapers of New York. In any event, it is not based on our kind of individualism, but on conformism. Personality must be won. It is a social function or the affirmation of society.”

Sartre’s next travel essay, also published in Le Figaro in 1945, was called simply “American Cities.” Here he begins again with the skyscrapers of New York, which, instead of “man-made, man-inhabited constructions,” appear to him “like rocks and hills, dead parts of the urban landscape one finds in cities built on turbulent soil and which you pass without even noticing.” Similarly, he writes later on, “the European feels at first as though he were travelling through a rocky chaos that resembles a city – something like Montpellier-le-Vieux – rather than a city.” This strange topography leaves him feeling lost, as if in a desert landscape or rocky mountain range, and so he turns to much the same catastrophist, geological rhetoric that we saw in Lévi-Strauss’s essay. Magna urbis magna solitudo, goes the Latin adage – “a great city is a great desert” – and indeed, it is ultimately the metaphor of the urban desert that Sartre claims inspired him to leave New York and see the actual deserts of the American West and South (if only from the window of an airplane). As he explains, these

274 Sartre, 113
275 Sartre, 114
276 Sartre, 122
desert landscapes are so foreign to the European experience that they actually appear mythical:

In order to learn to live in these cities and to like them as Americans do, I had to fly over the immense deserts of the west and south. Our European cities, submerged in human countrysides that have been worked over mile by mile, are continuous. And then we are vaguely aware that far away, across the sea, there is the desert, a myth. For the American, this myth is everyday reality.\textsuperscript{277}

Instead of dwelling on this idea of myth, however, Sartre goes on to rethink it by appealing to a more historical explanation: “the American city was, originally, a camp in the desert...nothing has changed since the time of covered wagons, every year towns are founded in the United States, and they are founded according to these same methods.”\textsuperscript{278}

It is here that Sartre comes to his trope of American lightness, which at first signifies the “fragility” of prefabricated or temporary buildings in cities across the country as well as the lack of stability and durability that is characteristic of migrating working communities and “roving villages.” A little later, however, he suggests that this migratory instability represents a general rule of American culture as a whole:

The striking thing is the lightness, the fragility of these buildings. The village has no weight, it seems barely to rest on the soil; it has not managed to leave a human imprint on the reddish earth and the dark forest; it is a temporary thing...

This roving village is no exception; in the United States, communities are born as they die – in a day. The Americans have no complaint to make; the main thing is to be able to carry their homes with them. These homes are the collections of objects, furnishings, photographs, and souvenirs belonging to them, that reflect their own image and constitute the inner, living landscape of their dwellings. These are their penates. Like Aeneas, they haul them about everywhere.

The “house” is the shell; it is abandoned on the slightest pretext.\textsuperscript{279}

By appealing the idea of lightness as opposed to height, Sartre also attempts to find alternatives to the idea of the “vertical” or “upright city” [ville debout], which was first defined by Céline, and then Le Corbusier, in their impressionistic writings on New York. Comparing

\textsuperscript{277} Sartre, 114
\textsuperscript{278} Sartre, 114-15
\textsuperscript{279} Sartre, 115-16. While here Sartre describes the American house as a shell, curiously, he seems to contradict himself later, arguing that it is European cities that are like shells, whereas American cities are “moving landscapes”: “An apartment house is bought to be demolished, and a larger apartment house is built on the same plot. After five years, the new house is sold to a contractor who tears it down to build a third one. The result is that in the States a city is a moving landscape for its inhabitants, whereas our cities are our shells.” Sartre, 117
the monumental verticality of American skyscrapers to the vast horizontality of the majority of the country’s architecture, he writes:

What are the impressions of a European who arrives in an American city? First, he thinks he has been taken in. He has heard only about skyscrapers; New York and Chicago have been described to him as “upright cities.” Now his first feeling is, on the contrary, that the average height of an American city is noticeably smaller than that of a French one. The immense majority of houses have only two stories. Even in the very large cities, the five-story apartment house is an exception.

Then he is struck by the lightness of the materials used….  

It is according to this principle of lightness, he goes on to suggest, that American cities are not only mobile and mutable, but also able to be destroyed and easily rebuilt. By way of contrast, he suggests that European cities are heavier, more sedentary, and fixed in place, and so their destruction during the war was that much more devastating. Although they were in the process of being rebuilt at the time of his writing, his curious implication is that urban reconstruction is much less “natural” or “normal” for Europeans than it is for Americans. At the same time, he claims that, in contrast to the heavy burden carried by European cities during the war, New York was merely “suspended in air,” and was therefore able to regain full mobility and circulation once it was over:

I am really visiting the United States in wartime; the vast life of the American city has suddenly become petrified; people hardly change their residences any more. But this stagnation is entirely temporary; the cities have been immobilized like the dancer on the film-screen who stays with his foot suspended in air when the film is stopped; one feels all about one the rising of the sap which will burst open the cities as soon as the war is ended.  

Alongside this metaphor of the light, dancing city, as well as what he calls the “puny insignificance” of American suburbs, Sartre also appeals to the more weighty idea of the “American Colossus,” although ultimately his argument is that none of these figures is entirely durable in the long term:

There is nothing more immediately striking than the contrast between the formidable power, the inexhaustible abundance of what is called the “American Colossus” and the puny insignificance of those little houses that line the widest roads in the world. But on second thought, there is no clearer indication that America is not finished, that her ideas and plans, her social structure and her cities have only a strictly temporary reality. 

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280 Sartre, 119
281 Sartre, 118
282 Sartre, 120
Whether as a “shell,” a “moving landscape,” a giant “colossus” or a “puny,” “temporary” structure, the house for Sartre is clearly not a “machine for living in,” as Le Corbusier had famously pronounced years before. Although he notes that Americans may think of houses as being like tools, cars or other “instruments to be exchanged for more convenient ones,” he obviously prefers a different perspective. Opposing the cult of the machine so important for the inter-war avant-garde, Sartre turns instead to organic metaphors and images in order to emphasize the subordination of urban existence to nature rather than the artificial power of the built environment. For instance, he writes that in Europe, “our beautiful closed cities, full as eggs, are a bit stifling,” whereas in the States, “the brick houses are the colour of dried blood.” In Europe, “the houses cluster like sheep” in order keep safe from the violence of nature, while “Los Angeles, in particular, is rather like a big earthworm that might be chopped into twenty pieces without being killed.” Finally, in describing the injustice of inner-city poverty and racial segregation in Chicago, Sartre focuses above all on figures of pollution, filth, and infestation in order to make the scene seem to come alive:

It is customary, in the United States, for the fashionable neighborhoods to slide from the centre to the outskirts of the city; after five years the centre of town is “polluted.” If you walk about there, you come upon tumble-down houses that retain a pretentious look beneath their filth….Chicago’s lurid Negro section contains some of these Greco-Roman temples; from the outside they look well. But inside, twelve rat- and louse-plagued Negro families are crowded together in five or six rooms.

In his final travel essay, “New York, the Colonial City,” Sartre again attempts to re-orient our attention away from the vision of New York as a “vertical city” by focusing instead on the apparently horizontal organization and circulation of its street life:

Céline has remarked of New York that “it is a vertical city.” This is true, but it seemed to me, at first, like a lengthwise city. The traffic that comes to a standstill in the side streets is all-privileged and flows tirelessly down the avenues. How often the taxi-drivers, willing to take passengers from north to south, flatly refuse to take any for the east and west! The side streets have hardly any function other than to mark off the limits of the apartment houses between the avenues. They are cut by the avenues, spread and thrown toward the north.
Here, Sartre’s emphasis on the horizontal rather than the vertical is arguably related to his essay’s overarching argument about the city’s proximity to the forces of Nature (especially since the animality of human life is often overlooked in favor of the image of the upright-walking *Homo Erectus* or the vertical architecture of the *Homo Faber*). In turn, it is by focusing on this particular conception of Nature that Sartre steers his essay toward his starkest and most fundamental contrast between France and the United States. For while French cities are able to remain so urbane because they keep nature at bay, he argues, Americans allow the violence of the wild to mix in with the civilized: “In France we are surrounded and protected by urban centres; the prosperous districts protect the rich from the poor, and the poor districts protect us from the disdain of the rich, and similarly, the entire city protects us against Nature.”

By contrast, in New York, Sartre feels himself overwhelmed by Nature as opposed to Civilization: the city *bewilders* him, much as it did for Lévi-Strauss. In perhaps the richest and most representative passage in all of his travel essays, Sartre discusses this experience at length:

Is it a city I am lost in, or is it Nature? New York is no protection against Nature’s violence. It is an open-skied city. Storms flood its wide streets that take so long to cross when it rains. Hurricanes shake the brick houses and rock the skyscrapers. They are announced formally over the radio, like declarations of war. In summer, the air vibrates between the houses; in winter, the city is flooded, so that you might think yourself in some Parisian suburb flooded by the Seine, but in America, it is only melting snow. Nature weighs so heavily on New York that this most modern of cities is also the dirtiest. From my window I see thick, muddy papers, tossed by the wind, flitting over the pavement. When I go out, I walk in a blackish snow, a sort of puffy crust the same colour as the sidewalk, so that it looks as if the sidewalk itself is buckling. From the first of May, the heat crashes down on the city like an atomic bomb. The heat is Evil. People go up to one another and say, “It’s murder!” The trains carry off millions of fleeing city-dwellers who, on descending from the train, leave damp marks on the seat, like snails. It is not the city they are fleeing, but Nature. Even in the depths of my apartment, I am open to attack from a mysterious and secretly hostile Nature. I feel as though I were camping in the heart of a jungle crawling with insects. There is the wailing of the wind, the electric shocks I get each time I touch a doorbell or shake my friend’s hand, the cockroaches that scoot across my kitchen, the elevators that make me nauseous and the inextinguishable thirst that rages in me from morning till night. New York is a colonial city, an outpost. All the hostility and cruelty of Nature are present in this city, the most prodigious monument man has ever erected to himself. In it is a light city; its apparent lack of weight surprises most Europeans.

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291 For more on this point, see especially my discussion of embodied metaphor, Freud and Bataille in my introduction, “Verticalism and Its Vicissitudes,” and my discussion of Kafka, Apollinaire and Joyce in my first chapter, “The Aesthetics of Aspiration.”

292 Sartre, 127
this immense and malevolent space, in this rocky desert that will tolerate no vegetation of any kind, millions of brick, wooden and reinforced concrete houses, that all look as if they are about to fly away, have been constructed.\textsuperscript{293}

Many of the arguments, metaphors and analogies apparent throughout Sartre’s essays (and many we also saw in Lévi-Strauss’s essay) are condensed into these two paragraphs. But what is he really saying here? 1: The “mysterious,” “hostile” and “cruel” violence of Nature “weighs” on New York and causes one to feel lost (whereas European cities, as he states earlier, are for the most part protected from Nature). 2: The violence of the weather is comparable to warfare, especially in how it is broadcast by the media, and the heat in particular is comparable to the atom bomb: it’s so “Evil” that people actually say “it’s murder.” (This further exemplifies the immediate, post-war context of Sartre’s essay). 3: People leave the city on trains to escape the natural elements rather than the city itself. 4: The city is like a “jungle” above all because of its harsh effects on the body. 5: New York is a “colonial city” or “outpost” above all because of its proximity to Nature. 6: The city itself is light, despite the fact that it is weighed down by Nature, and this surprises Europeans, whose cities are by implication much more heavy. 7: New York is comparable to a rocky, lifeless desert with houses that appear able to float up into the sky.

As an “open-skied city” unprotected from the forces of nature, Sartre’s New York is also comparable to that of Albert Camus, whose travel essay “Les pluies à New York”\textsuperscript{294} dwells mainly on the image of the rain falling down on the city. Yet while Camus saw the rain in New York as a moody, mournful metaphor for the experience of exile, Sartre suggests that the sky over New York, which both protects and attacks the city “like a wild beast,” is also “the whole world’s sky,” and as such, it ultimately guards over the entire planet:

I learned to like New York’s sky. In European cities where roofs are low, the sky crawls close to the earth and seems tamed. The New York sky is beautiful because the skyscrapers push it back, very far over our heads. Pure and lonely as a wild beast, it guards and watches over the city. And it is not only a local protection; one feels that it stretches out into the distance all over America; it is the whole world’s sky [\textit{c'est le ciel du monde entier}].\textsuperscript{295}

It is perhaps for this reason that Sartre calls New York “the colonial city,” a term he uses only once in his essay and then never actually explains. On the one hand, this is presumably a reference to the fact that New York is literally a former colony, and thus still bears traces of its long colonial history. This in turn relates to the primitivist rhetoric behind his (and Lévi-Strauss’s) descriptions of the city’s proximity to Nature: it’s image as a “rocky desert,” or as wild and dirty “urban jungle.” However, another aspect to Sartre’s title is that New York has become a neo-colonial city in its own right. The implication here is that,

\textsuperscript{293} Sartre, 128-9
\textsuperscript{295} Sartre, 130
rather than being a former colony or “outpost,” or an ultra-modern, international, or global
city, New York has become a new imperial capital to rival the likes of London and Paris.
This should help explain Sartre’s uncertainty about whether New York is protective city or a
hostile one, and ultimately, whether the United States invaded Europe in order to save it or
to conquer it.

Belonging to the Future: Beauvoir

In the first four months of 1947,296 one year after Sartre’s trip, Simone Beauvoir
embarked on her own solo journey across the United States. She published the travel diary
of her impressions the following year under the title *L’Amérique au jour le jour* (the English
translation appeared in 1952 under the title *America Day By Day*), and dedicated it “To Ellen
and Richard Wright,” whom she had befriended in Paris beforehand. The Wrights had
previously been married in Chicago after the novelist separated from his first wife, and it was
there that Beauvoir later met Nelson Algren, with whom she developed a love affair that
lasted by some accounts for almost two decades.297 Although she evidently left part of her
heart in Chicago, her first stop in the United States was New York, and this was the city that
impressed her most in her travels. “I belong to New York, and New York belongs to me,”
she insisted at various points throughout her travels,298 and even invited Algren to visit her
there instead of returning to Chicago to see him.299

Writing in her first diary entry from the airplane even before landing on the ground,
Beauvoir considers Paris and New York as cities “intertwined” across air space and time
zones: “There. It’s happened. I’m flying to New York…It’s eight o’clock in Paris and two
o’clock in New York. Time and space are intertwined. My dreams are less extravagant than
this great wing I’m attached to, gliding motionless between clouds and stars.” She then goes
on a little later: “There is only one world, and New York is a city of the world…Across from
Old Europe, on the threshold of a continent populated by 160 million people, New York
belongs to the future.”300

This romanticization of New York as the metropolitan center of the American future
is evident throughout Beauvoir’s travelogue despite her occasional ruminations on Europe

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296 This was at a high point in her writing and publishing, soon after the publication of her novels
*L’invitée* (*She Came to Stay*), *Tous les hommes sont mortels* (*All Men Are Mortal*) and *Le sang des autres* (*The Blood of Others*),
the same year that *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté* (*The Ethics of Ambiguity*) came out in book form, and two years
before the publication of *Le deuxième sexe* (*The Second Sex*).

297 For their full correspondence in English, see de Beauvoir, Simone. *A Transatlantic Love Affair: Letters to Nelson Algren*, ed. and trans. Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir, Sara Holloway, Vanessa Kling, Kate LeBlanc,

298 Beauvoir, 256

299 “Today I’m taking a walk with N.A., who has come to New York on business. [Actually, Simone
de Beauvoir invited Algren to join her in New York at this point. –ed].] He passed through town when he left
for France as a GI and when he returned, but he doesn’t know the city. Intellectuals and other people of
modest means travel very little: a Chicagoan spends his life in Chicago; many people from Brooklyn have never
seen Manhattan. I’m amused to see N.A. discover New York through the eyes of a man from Chicago.”
Beauvoir, 320.

300 Beauvoir, Simone, 3.
and attempts at a more sober realism. As soon as she entertains it, for instance, she considers a counter-argument, but it is obviously fleeting:

I try to reason with myself – New York is real and present – but this feeling persists. Usually, traveling is an attempt to annex a new object to my universe; this in itself is a fascinating undertaking. But today it's different: I feel I'm leaving my life behind. I don’t know if it will be through anger or hope, but something is going to be revealed – a world so full, so rich, and so unexpected that I’ll have the extraordinary adventure of becoming a different me.

Still feeling high after she’s settled down and taken a nap, she goes on to reflect on the existential questions she sees before her:

Brooklyn exists, as does Manhattan with all its skyscrapers and all of America on the horizon. As for me, I no longer exist. There. I understand what I’ve come to find – this plenitude that we rarely feel except in childhood or in early youth, when we’re utterly absorbed by something outside ourselves. To be sure, on other trips I’ve tasted this joy, this certitude, but it was fleeting. In Greece, in Italy, in Spain, in Africa, I still felt that Paris was the heart of the world. I’d never completely left Paris; I remained inside myself.301

Beauvoir makes it clear here that she is not just seeking to understand New York and American culture in crossing the Atlantic – the first time she had ever done so – but is also hoping to find herself. She suggests that in her previous travels, she had always maintained Eurocentric sense of metropolitan French centrality: wherever she went, she knew that she was always visiting someplace peripheral to Paris, and was in no danger of becoming de-centered. By contrast, in coming to New York, she has confronted a new challenge: this other city seizes control over her existential sense of subjectivity and takes hold of her as no other place has done before. And with the ascendance of this new “sovereign” object of power also comes the loss of the old “hegemony,” as she explains:

Paris has lost its hegemony. I’ve landed not only in a foreign country but in another world – an autonomous, separate world. I touch this world; it’s here. It will be given to me. But it’s not even to me that it will be given; its existence is too dazzlingly clear for me to hope to catch it in my net. The revelation will take place somewhere beyond the limits of my own existence. In a flash I’m freed from the cares of that tedious enterprise I call my life. I’m just the charmed consciousness through which the sovereign Object will reveal itself. 302

301 Beauvoir, 13-14.
302 Beauvoir, 13-14.
In addition to Beauvoir’s attention to political questions of class and gender, one of the most surprising aspects of her travelogue is her race consciousness, which was obviously informed to a large extent by her friendship with Richard Wright. This relatively sensitive concern for racial prejudice, ideology, and inequality makes her impressionistic reflections appear far more progressive than most other travelogues by her compatriots, including those who came much later. For instance, although Jean Baudrillard would also attempt to confront racial difference some forty years later in his book *America*, his essentialist appeals to primitivism and exoticism seem remarkably retrograde in comparison.  

Beauvoir’s reflexive critique of racial fear is surprisingly frank: why does she feel afraid to walk in Harlem, she asks herself directly, and why might whites fear blacks or other minorities at all?

I walk toward Harlem, but my footsteps are not quite as carefree as usual; this isn’t just a walk but a kind of adventure. A force pulls me back, a force that emanates from the borders of the black city and drives me back — fear. No mine but that of others – the fear of all those whites who never take the risk of going to Harlem, who feel the presence of a vast, mysterious, and forbidden zone in the northern part of their city, where they are transformed into the enemy. I turn the corner of one avenue and I feel my heart stop; in the blink of an eye, the landscape is transformed….. Nothing is frightening, but the fear is there; it weighs on this great popular festivity. Crossing the street is, for me, like crossing through layers and layers of fear: the fear filling those bright-eyed children, those schoolgirls, those men in light suits, and those leisurely women.”

If this fear is not exactly her own but is rather received through contact with the hateful fears and prejudices of others, as she claims, then where does it originate and what ultimately drives it? “In fact,” she claims, “the reasons for the white man’s attitude must be sought not among blacks but among whites.” Her argument is that those who have power through majority status have an irrational fear of losing that power by coming into contact with minorities. Although she suggests that the wealthy, bourgeois universe will indeed be “defeated,” it will be due to its own failures rather than the rebellion of the poor and oppressed. For by attempting to deny the existence of places like Harlem, whites are ultimately living in denial, and by persisting in ignorance or hatred in order to avoid their own repressed shame and remorse, they are ultimately afraid of themselves:

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303 Witness: “The beauty of the Black and Puerto Rican women of New York. Apart from the sexual stimulation produced by the crowding together of so many races, it must be said that black, the pigmentation of the dark races, is like a natural make-up that is set off by the artificial kind to produce a beauty which is not sexual, but sublime and animal, a beauty which the pale faces so desperately lack. Whiteness seems an extenuation of physical adornment, a neutrality which, perhaps by that very token, claims all the exoteric powers of the Word, but ultimately will never possess the esoteric and ritual potency of artifice.” Baudrillard, 16.

304 Beauvoir, 34-25

305 Beauvoir, 243
It’s natural for a wealthy bourgeois to be afraid if he ventures into neighborhood where people go hungry: he’s strolling in a universe that rejects his and will one day defeat it. But Harlem is a whole society, with its bourgeois and its proletariat, its rich and its poor, who are not bound together in revolutionary action. They want to become part of America—they have no interest in destroying it. These blacks are not suddenly going to surge toward Wall Street, they constitute no immediate threat. The irrational fear they inspire can only be the reverse of hatred and a kind of remorse. Planted in the heart of New York, Harlem weighs on the conscience of whites like original sin on a Christian. Among men of his own race, the American embraces a dream of good humor, benevolence, and friendship. He even puts his virtues into practice. But they die on the borders of Harlem….. And all the whites who do not have the courage to desire brotherhood try to deny this rupture in the heart of their own city; they try to deny Harlem, to forget it. It’s not a threat to the future; it’s a wound in the present, a cursed city, the city where they are cursed. It’s themselves they’re afraid to meet on the street corners. And because I’m white, whatever I think and say and do, this curse weighs on me as well. I dare not smile at the children in the squares; I don’t feel I have the right to stroll in the streets where the color of my eyes signifies injustice, arrogance, and hatred.

Here we see that Beauvoir clearly prefers to admit her white guilt instead of repressing or denying it because she believes it is more honest, responsible and courageous to do so. For her, Harlem is a “cursed city” that should be exorcised, a “wound in the present” that should be healed rather than a “threat to the future” to be feared or avoided.

This self-conscious critique of white denial may be read as an attempt to overcome what Anne Cheng has called “the melancholy of race,” and what Arjun Appadurai has called the “fear of small numbers,” in their different yet comparable studies published under those names. That said, it is Richard Wright to whom Beauvoir herself turns as an authority on race as well as an aid in her own struggle for ethical legitimation. Despite her well-meaning intentions, this deferral to Wright could also be questioned in terms of what Toni Morrison calls “the parasitical nature of white freedom” in her hard-hitting book Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination. For as Beauvoir admits: “It's because of this moral discomfort, not timidity, that I'm happy to be escorted this evening to the Savoy by Richard Wright. I'll feel less suspect.” She then goes on to call Wright’s friendship and presence “a kind of absolution.” As a form of confessional discourse (especially considering her Catholic upbringing and schooling), these words may also be interpreted as a plea for

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306 Beauvoir, 36
309 Beauvoir, 37
spiritual forgiveness or salvation. Indeed, at least according to her account, this was in fact granted to her, for it was at Wright’s invitation that she attended religious services at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem a few days later, and then again after her return to New York toward the end of her travels.

This second visit to Harlem followed soon after Beauvoir’s trip to the American south, where she became increasingly disturbed and angry by the overt racism and segregation she witnessed. Although she had apparently been warned to avoid discussing “the black question” at the beginning of her trip, she finally decides at this point not to hold back any longer, and in her entry dated April 3, she produces an outpouring of fourteen continuous pages of personal and critical reflection. It begins with the disclaimer:

I remember that on the first evening of my stay in New York a Frenchman asked me not to write about anything about the black question, on the pretext that I couldn’t understand anything in only three months. I agree that my experience is meager for such a vast subject; yet it would be unnatural not to talk about a set of facts that I’ve often run up against and that have such great importance in American life.”

From here, Beauvoir goes on to reflect on her own uncertainties while at the same time critiquing what she considers the far more blatant ignorance and “bad faith” about race so prevalent among white southerners, which she compares to her own familiarity with French colonial ideology:

Southerners readily say there is no black problem, that it’s a myth invented by northerners: in fact, they’re obsessed with it. The bad faith they bring to discussion is proof itself of the conflict of values going on inside them. Their ignorance helps them; they claim to “know” the black man, just as French colonials believe they “know” the native, because their servants are blacks.

Beauvoir was clearly already devoted to the more pluralistic environment of New York, having admitted her profound attachment to the city the moment she got on the train to leave it for the first time: “My heart is torn as if I were leaving someone special. I didn’t think I could love another city as much as Paris.” As she explains, her nostalgic mourning for cosmopolitan urbanity only deepened the longer she remained away, and she was obviously relieved when she returned two months later: “I feel the same joy in my heart that I feel when I return to Paris – I’m back in my city.”

The separation has domesticated New York. All its exoticism has vanished. There is no longer another world on the horizon, against which these houses,

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310 Beauvoir, 236
311 Beauvoir, 238
312 Beauvoir, 72.
313 Beauvoir, 253
these advertisements and window displays stand out as strange shapes; Europe is forgotten and it’s this world that is the backdrop to my life. I show N. [Nathalie Sorkine Moffatt, her friend and travelling companion from Los Angeles] the streets, avenues, and skyscrapers with as much pride as if I were showing a friend from the provinces around Paris.314

But Beauvoir is obviously not in Paris, as she repeatedly makes clear. Ultimately, her concern for what she would later call “the ethics of ambiguity” already emerges already here in her first walks around New York, where she begins to sense that the apparently rigid and geometric spatial form of the city is representative of a larger American disdain for subtlety:

To accept nuances is to accept ambiguity of judgment, argument, and hesitation; such complex situations force you to think. They want to lead their lives by geometry, not by wisdom. Geometry is taught, whereas wisdom is discovered, and only the first offers the refreshing certainties that a conscientious person needs. So they choose to believe in a geometric world where every right angle is set against another, like their buildings and their streets.315

As we shall see, Michael de Certeau also attempted to critique this appearance of overarching rigidity in his somewhat more critical and academic essay “Walking in the City.” Yet while Certeau ultimately rejects the image of the metropolitan panorama, Beauvoir maintains her romantic impression of New York especially with regard to its spectacular verticality. Looking at the Brooklyn Bridge against the Manhattan skyline, for instance, she remarks, “The bridge’s horizontal thrust and the skyscrapers’ vertical lift seem amplified. The light is a glorious reward for their audacity.316 More significantly, she makes a point of visiting the Empire State Building toward the beginning of her trip, and unlike Sartre or Le Corbusier before her, describes her experience of going to the top. After marveling at the extended “vertical journey”317 of the express elevators, she finally reaches the eightieth floor and ventures out onto the lookout deck, where she describes herself reveling in the panoramic view from the tallest point in the world:

The geographic plan is so clear; the water’s luminous presence reveals the original earthly element with such clarity that the houses are forgotten, and I see New York as a piece of the virgin planet. The rivers, archipelago, curves and peninsula belong to prehistory; the sea is ageless. By contrast, the simplicity of the perpendicular streets makes them look extremely young. This city has only just been born; it covers a light crust of rocks older than the Flood. Yet when the lights come on from the Bronx to the

314 Beauvoir, 254
315 Beauvoir, 67.
316 Beauvoir, 13-14.
317 Beauvoir, 32.
Battery, from New Jersey to Brooklyn, the sea and the sky are merely the setting: the city confirms the rule of man, which is the truth of the world.\footnote{Beauvoir, 32}

While the Empire State Building was still evidently new and surprising in 1947, it would be surpassed a few decades later by the World Trade Center and Sears Tower (now called the Willis Tower), and the metropolitan view from above would start to lose some of its novelty and appeal. In turn, with the expansion of American empire and the simultaneous decline of French influence on the world stage, the image of the vertical, “panoptic” tower would become a central site of contention for a number of critics following the work of Michel Foucault and the rise of French post-structuralism in general. For Certeau in particular, the American skyscraper would no longer offer an innocent view onto “the virgin planet,” or stand for the “truth of the world,” but would instead represent the seductive power of dubious vision, which should be rejected rather than embraced.

**Against Panopticism: Michel de Certeau and the World Trade Center**

Michel de Certeau’s essay “Walking in the City” opens with the line “I am standing on the 110th floor of the World Trade Center.”\footnote{Certeau, Michel de. *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). In French: *L’invention du quotidien: Arts de faire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990)}\footnote{According to Fredric Jameson, this was the last year of the so-called “American Century,” which he suggests lasted from 1945 to 1973, when, out of the “dust clouds,” a “strange new landscape” emerged: “It is in my sense that both levels in question, infrastructure and superstructures – the economic system and the cultural ‘structure of feeling’ – somehow crystallized in the great shock of the crises of 1973 (the oil crisis, the end of the national gold standard, for all intents and purposes the end of the great wave of ‘wars of national liberation’ and the beginning of the end of traditional communism), which, now that the dust clouds have rolled away, disclose the existence, already in place, of a strange new landscape.” See Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), xx. This calls for some reconsideration today in light of the resurgence of American “Empire,” as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call it in their book of that name. See Hardt, Michael and Negri, Antonio. *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001). It was written not long after the towers opened in 1973,\footnote{Beauvoir, 32} and was first published in 1980 under the French title “Marches dans la ville” in the book *L’invention du quotidien*, the first volume of *Arts de faire*. Although this essay has been frequently cited and anthologized in publications across the disciplines, little new has been said about it since the destruction of the World Trade Center in 2001. And so it seems appropriate to reflect on the divide that separates the time of Certeau’s writing and the period after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the melancholic crisis of American nationalism that followed from it, and the reactionary violence of American imperialism that arose with a vengeance soon after.

Reading Certeau’s critique of panopticism from this perspective, we might interpret it as a warning against any understanding of cities in isolation from the world at large, not just in terms of their cosmopolitan cultural capital, but also their symbolic value for governmentalization and empire-building. Yet this might be reading too much into it, for although it does argue that panoramic visions of metropolitan centers are not as permanent,
stable, or “panoptic” as they might at first appear, it does not consider terroristic violence or war in any way.

Returning to Certeau’s essay in relation to earlier French writings on New York should help us better recognize his critique not as a uniquely ominous “foreshadowing” of events to come, but rather as a revision of previous perspectives.321 For remarkably, none of the many writers we have considered here attempted to critique New York’s ascendance from the perspective of its great height. Although Beauvoir described her experience of reaching the top of the Empire State Building in detail, she did so in order to praise the view she found at the top, and while the other writers did indeed launch harsh critiques of the city’s “vertical push,” as Léger called it, they always did so from the ground level. By contrast, Certeau explicitly frames his critique by adopting the panoramic view from above. Of course his ultimate aim was to reject it, however, for in opposition to excessive vertical hubris, he called for playful, horizontal possibility.

One of the main problems with critiques of the panoramic trope since the publication of Michel Foucault’s famous study of prisons, Discipline and Punish [Surveiller et Punir],322 is that they too easily equate it with the Panopticon, a slippage that Certeau both entertains and questions throughout his essay. This connection is also tempting in considering Walter Benjamin’s much earlier writings on the wax museums of Berlin, whose panoramic exhibitions of imperial exoticism were in fact called Panoptikums. For instance, in the “Panorama” section of his Arcades Project, Benjamin discusses these displays in terms of totalization, universalism and monumentality: “The wax museum [Panoptikum], a manifestation of the total work of art. The universalism of the nineteenth century has its monument in the waxworks. Panopticon: not only does one see everything, but one sees it in all ways.”323

Yet while both the panorama and the Panopticon appear to have the power of “seeing all,” only the latter, according to Foucault’s discussion of Bentham’s model prison, produces the disciplinary power of surveillance, and in turn the self-policing role that individuals take on as subjects of disciplinary society. In “Walking in the City,” Certeau argues that panoramic vision need not have this disciplinary function, especially considering that views from the top of monumental buildings are too distant to maintain any power over the tiny specks of people down below.324 Instead, he considers the city as a “stage of concrete, steel and glass” on which urbanites perform their everyday lives regardless of the possibility of overarching vision. From the top of the World Trade Center, this stage appears far more rigid and regulated than it does from the ground: “agitation is momentarily arrested by vision. The gigantic mass is immobilized before the eyes.”325 Yet for Certeau, this

321 For a trenchant critique of the faulty logic of historical “foreshadowing,” see Bernstein, Michael. Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994)
324 Of course this is more debatable today, given the rise of digital surveillance from orbiting satellites to hidden cameras, although the counter-argument could be made that handheld cameras and mobile camera phones have restored some of the power of surveillance to individuals, who can now counter abuses of state power with documentary evidence of their own.
325 Certeau, 91.
The immobilizing vision of the “panorama-city” is merely “a theoretical” (that is, visual) simulacrum, in short a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices.” Although the panoramic view from above may fix the city into a single, spatialized picture, the experience of everyday practice on the ground does away with such “imaginary totalizations produced by the eye.” According to Certeau, everyday practices are “foreign to the ‘geometrical’ or ‘geographical’ space of visual, panoptic, or theoretical constructions.”

Because Certeau’s argument is directed against the illusion of stability and certainty in height, he views the grounding effect of downfall and decline as leading to a more accurate understanding of the everyday. From this perspective, he describes the turn from verticality to horizontality as an “Icarian fall” from the top of the World Trade Center, which not only brings the panoramic spectator down to the pedestrian level of the crowd, but also away from the dubious promise of happiness for which the towers apparently stood:

Must one finally fall back into the dark space where crowds move back and forth, crowds that, though visible from on high, are themselves unable to see down below? An Icarian fall. On the 110th floor, a poster, sphinx-like, addresses an enigmatic message to the pedestrian who is for an instant transformed into a visionary: It’s hard to be down when you’re up.

It is in this way that Certeau’s urban utopianism grounds itself in the pedestrian, and in distinct opposition to the monumental. For because “the World Trade Center is only the most monumental figure of Western urban development,” as he says, its vertical form stands for “a gigantic rhetoric of excess in both expenditure and production.” By contrast, signifying practices on the ground represent a quotidian, horizontal mobility that is able to undermine regulatory power from below:

The childhood experience that determines spatial practices later develops its effects, proliferates, floods private and public spaces, undoes their readable surfaces, and creates within the planned city a “metaphorical” or mobile city, like the one Kandinsky dreamed of: “a great city built according to all the rules of architecture and then suddenly shaken by a force that defies all calculation.”

For Certeau, the grounded space of the metropolis is not only the foundation for vertical architecture, it is also what undermines pretensions to panoramic vision – and as such it is curiously linked to the familiar and maternal. Comparing the manipulation of metropolitan space to the “matrix-experience” of Freud’s “fort-da” game, Certeau capitalizes on the etymology of metropolis (“mother-city,” from the Greek matrix, meaning “womb”) without ever stating it overtly. He thus considers the pleasurable possibilities of urban practice in
terms of the playful manipulation of appearance and disappearance, memory and return, which is characteristic of childhood: “To practice space is thus to repeat the joyful and silent experience of childhood; it is, in a place, to be other and to move toward the other.”

In this sense, Certeau is similar to Benjamin in appealing to the idea of the flâneur, the “Man of the World” for whom, according to Baudelaire, “genius is nothing more nor less than childhood recovered at will.” This urban wanderer experiences the worldliness of the city on the ground and in the “matrix-experience” of the streets; as a “Man of the World,” he stands in direct contrast to the sovereign “King of the World” depicted in the Carousel scene of Benjamin’s Berlin Childhood, an overarching figure of empire who claims globalism through expansive, panoramic distance without actually experiencing the world at all.

From this perspective, worldly cosmopolitanism emerges as an oppositional alternative to imperial globalism, a grounded experience of the world rather than a panoramic or monocentric fantasy of it. For Certeau, it is only through this urban grounding, being connected to the multiplicitous possibilities of urban space instead of rising upward toward a will to panoramic power, that a liberatory metropolis can ever hope to become more than just a utopian fantasy.

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331 Certeau, 110.
333 For Edward Said, “monocentrism” is what worldly criticism opposes more than anything else: “Most of all, I think, criticism is worldly and in the world so long as it opposes monocentrism in the narrowest as well as the widest sense of that too infrequently considered notion: for monocentrism is a concept I take in conjunction with ethnocentrism, the assumption that culture masks itself as the sovereignty of this one and this human, whereas culture is the process of dominion and struggle always dissembling, always deceiving. Monocentrism is practiced when we mistake one’s ideas as the only idea, instead of recognizing that an idea in history is always one among many. Monocentrism denies plurality, it totalizes structure, it sees profit where there is waste, it decrees the concentricity of Western culture instead of its eccentricity, it believes continuity to be given and will not try to understand, instead, how continuity as much as discontinuity is made.” Said, Edward. “The Text, the World, and the Critic” in Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Thought, Josué V. Harari, ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 188.
Chapter Three
THE AESTHETICS OF SUSPENSION:
Vertical Wandering in the Post-War American Novel

In 1949, Eugene Jolas published an essay called “Pan-Romanticism in the Atomic Age,” which served as the conclusion to a collection of writings from *transition*, the journal he had edited in Paris for some two decades. Much of this essay argues for the persistence of Romantic ideas throughout the rise of Symbolism, Expressionism, Dadaism, Surrealism, and, above all, Verticalism, the movement he pioneered during his own literary career. Despite his title, however, Jolas considers that Romanticism may be fading into history, and, by referring to Verticalism for the first time in the past tense, he seems to mark its ultimate demise:

...verticalism revolted against the nightmare quality of its predecessors and inaugurated an attempt to liberate the human personality from the possession of nihilism. It stressed the creative urge towards a liturgical renascence by reconstructing the myth of voyage, migration, flight, and particularly ascent, in all its romantic-mystic manifestations. It sought the “marvelous of the skies” in the poetry of aeronautical flight, in the conquest of the law of gravitation, and in an aspiration towards aerial perspectives. It also developed the poetry of cosmic or sidereal flight, tried to sing of the stellar spaces, and accentuated the vision of the “third eye.” In the poetry of mystic flight it sought a transcendental reality. This new poetry of ascent wanted to express its vision in a language that would make possible a hymnic vocabularly.\(^334\)

While for many it may seem obvious that such neo-romantic calls for vertical transcendence have lost much of their aesthetic appeal since Jolas wrote this essay, the reason why this took place in the aftermath of World War II requires further investigation. As I shall argue here, the *aesthetics of aspiration* that emerged with the rise of trans-Atlantic modernism gradually gave way to a more anxious and critical *aesthetics of suspension* as the United States emerged from the war as a political, economic and military superpower in the global age of the atom bomb. Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, also published in 1949, offers one of the best representations of this postwar anxiety of immanence, oscillation, and indeterminacy (and in fact Beckett had worked with Jolas on earlier projects for *transition* while both were living in Paris, and even signed his 1932 manifesto “Poetry is Vertical”). However, although numerous other European examples could also be cited for the sake of comparison,\(^335\) my argument here is that the aesthetics of suspension developed a unique historical significance in postwar American fiction.

\(^{335}\) For instance, one might consider comparable problems of history and spatial form, albeit with a more tragic bent, in the postwar French novels of Natalie Sarraute, Michel Butor, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Marguerite Duras. I focus on these questions with particular regard to French decolonization and globalism in
One of the earliest literary attempts to address the tension between aesthetic reflection and the emerging myth of the “American Century” was Saul Bellow’s first novel *Dangling Man*, which was published in 1944 as the war had yet to be concluded. In the following decades, as American teenagers, beatniks and hippies increasingly found themselves “hanging out” or “tripping,” the tropes of vertical wandering that Bellow helped to introduce became regular features of the postwar American novel. As I shall show here, they came to be embodied by such memorable protagonists as Yossarian, nicknamed “Yo-Yo” in Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*; Billy Pilgrim, who becomes “unstuck in time” in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*; and Benny Profane, who is defined as a “human yo-yo and schlimehl” in Thomas Pynchon’s *V.*, and who eventually ends up working for Yoyodyne, Inc., the mysterious military-industrial company that links up Pynchon’s other postwar novels, *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*.  

In many ways, what I am calling the aesthetics of suspension is the reverse of what Samuel Taylor Coleridge called the “willing suspension of disbelief” in his romantic attempt to justify the persistence of fantasy in the age of enlightenment reason. For rather than asserting either belief or disbelief, this more anti-romantic poetics tends instead toward the critical suspension of judgment itself. In this sense it is in many ways akin to what the ancient Greek skeptics called *epoché*, which Edmund Husserl reconsidered in terms of *phenomenological reduction* or *bracketing*, and Jacques Derrida further developed through his theory of *différance*. As a kind of aesthetic resistance to power, the aesthetics of suspension appears to question both the master narratives of modernization as well as neo-romantic ideas of revolution, and, by deferring the possibility for resolution, legitimation or decidability, ends up oscillating between “far out” fantasies of transcendence and a more...
“cool” realism of immanence. In turn, it often seems to struggle with an impossible choice between hysterical engagement and paranoid avoidance, between the aestheticization of violence or trauma and the blasé indulgence in what John Barth called “the literature of exhaustion”\textsuperscript{341} and Theodor Adorno eventually acknowledged as a form of “resignation.”\textsuperscript{342}

As I shall argue here, these concerns emerged above all with the awareness that, for the first time in world history, all life on the planet has become vulnerable to annihilation from above. John F. Kennedy argued this point especially powerfully in a speech he gave to the United Nations in 1961. One year before the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy characterized the new world of atomic terror by referring back to an ancient, mythical figure of suspension: “Every man, woman and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles, hanging by the slenderest threads, capable of being cut at any moment by accident or miscalculation or by madness.”\textsuperscript{343} As we shall see, such figures of suspension emerged as distinct alternatives to modernist revisions of ancient stories like those of Icarus and Daedalus or Babel, which I addressed in previous chapters, and came to pervade not only American political rhetoric during the Cold War era, but also its poetics.

The Age of Anxiety and the Burden of History

For W.H. Auden, writing in his Pulitzer Prize-winning poem of 1947, this period was characterized best as “the Age of Anxiety,”\textsuperscript{344} a turn of phrase that quickly became popular in postwar American discourse. For instance, when left-liberal historian Arthur Schlesinger attempted to understand the post-war situation in the opening to his book The Vital Center, he wrote: “Western man in the middle of the twentieth century is tense, uncertain, adrift….We look upon our time as a time of troubles, an age of anxiety.”\textsuperscript{345}

But why was American culture beset with such anxiety if it had emerged from World War II as a victorious superpower? In 1958, Hannah Arendt, a close friend of Auden’s,\textsuperscript{346} attempted an answer in her classic liberal critique The Human Condition. Opening with the


\textsuperscript{343}For a broadly historicist take on the implications of this for American literature, see Cordle, Daniel. States of Suspense: The Nuclear Age, Postmodernism and United States Fiction and Prose (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008).

\textsuperscript{344}Auden, W.H. The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Elocuq (New York: Faber, 1947); forthcoming as a new critical edition edited by Alan Jacobs (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011). This was one year after Camus published his essay “The Century of Fear” in the French newspaper Combat (19 November, 1946). Yet while Camus argued that post-war fear was based on an obsession with the past, the American age of anxiety was oriented around the present.

\textsuperscript{345}Schlesinger, Arthur. The Vital Center (Transaction Books, 1977), 1. The theologian Paul Tillich also explored the idea in his 1952 book The Courage to Be, writing: “Today it has become almost a truism to call our time an ‘age of anxiety.’ This holds equally for America and Europe.” (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 35. A quick search shows that this phrase has been revisited in books on a range of topics in American culture since then, from the rise of anxiety medication to the rise of the “red scare” and the “war on terror.”

\textsuperscript{346}For more on the connection between the two, See Young-Gottlieb, Susanna. Regions of Sorrow: Anxiety and Messianism in Hannah Arendt and W.H. Auden (Stanford University Press, 2003).
claim that a shift from the “modern age” to the “modern world” had taken place with the coming of the atomic age, Arendt’s book was no doubt already well-informed by Karl Jaspers’ argument, put forth in his book of the same year, The Atom Bomb and the Future of Man, that nuclear warfare has become “the new fact” of modernity. In contrast to what Heidegger had conceptualized two decades before as “the age of the world picture,” Jaspers and Arendt argued for a more political globalism based on the recognition of common planetary geography rather than an abstract idea of worldliness. In particular, according to Arendt, the threat of nuclear destruction has led to a new sense that, for the first time in history, the earth has come to appear more like a prison to escape than a home to inhabit.

Arendt’s overarching argument that “the earth is the quintessence of the human condition” is based on an implicit belief that the experience of being bound to the planet should remain the shared ground for any humanist project (especially in an age when military violence increasingly comes from above). It is from this perspective that she goes on to critique the space race that was inaugurated by the 1957 launching of Sputnik, the first planetary satellite, and the uncanny sense of “relief” that seemed to result from it:

This event, second in importance to no other, not even to the splitting of the atom, would have been greeted with unmitigated joy if it had not been for the uncomfortable military and political circumstances attending it. But, curiously enough, this joy was not triumphal; it was not pride or awe at the tremendousness of human power and mastery which filled the hearts of men, who now, when they looked up from the earth toward the skies, could behold there a thing of their own making. The immediate reaction, expressed on the spur of the moment, was relief about the first “step toward escape from men’s imprisonment on earth.” And this strange statement, far from being the accidental slip of some American reporter, unwittingly echoed the extraordinary line which, more than twenty years ago, had been carved on the funeral obelisk for one of Russia’s great scientists: “Mankind will not remain bound to the earth for ever.”

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347 Gertrude Stein, also recognized that nuclear warfare presented modernity with a new sense of uncertainty and fear, although in her “Reflection on the Atomic Bomb,” written in 1947 and published a year later in the Yale Poetry Review, she claimed to be immune to it: “They asked me what I thought of the atomic bomb. I said I had not been able to take any interest in it...Sure it will destroy a lot and kill a lot, but it’s the living that are interesting not the way of killing them, because if there were not a lot left living how could there be any interest in destruction. Alright, that is the way I feel about it. They think they are interested about the atomic bomb but they really are not not any more than I am. Really not. They may be a little scared, I am not so scared, there is so much to be scared of so what is the use of bothering to be scared, and if you are not scared the atomic bomb is not interesting.” Stein, Gertrude. Reflections on the Atom Bomb (Black Sparrow Press, 1973), 161

348 Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 2. For more recent arguments related to this idea, see Gayatri Spivak’s discussion of “Planetarity” in her book Death of a Discipline (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), which takes account of postcolonial critiques of the humanities in order to reformulate the future of critical humanist study, as well as the work Wai Chee Dimock, especially her essay “Planetary Time and Global Translation: ‘Context in Literary Studies’” in Common Knowledge 9.3 (2003).

349 Arendt, The Human Condition, 1
What is especially unique about this argument is not so much its validity in historicizing the emergence of a new “modern world,” or its comparison with such other periodizations as the postmodern or postcolonial, but rather its recognition of space as a historical problem of power and militarization. We may thus read Arendt’s emphasis on “relief” not only in terms of postwar freedom and possibility, but also in terms of intervention, engagement and aid. This more metaphorical sense of relief in or from history, if not even for it, became especially important for literary writers from Auden to Pynchon—and perhaps above all for the booming “golden age” of science fiction. Such major examples as Ray Bradbury’s The Martian Chronicles, Isaac Asimov’s Foundation and Galactic Empire series, Arthur C. Clark’s Childhood’s End, and films like The Day the Earth Stood Still (Robert Wise, 1951) and Forbidden Planet (Fred M. Wilcox, 1956) provide good evidence of how postwar fantasies of outer space worked to manage new anxieties about the global space of the atomic age.

Despite the increasingly spatial turn of historiography, such ideas of global relief continue to appear relatively fantastical or utopian, as history still tends to be understood as temporally fixed in the past and thus open only to celebration, understanding or critique rather than revision, change, or redirection. Yet if we are to conceive of a world that is being developed through space as well as through time, of the spatialization of history as well as of memory, we still need a more adequate understanding of history as spatial, geographical and topographical. Along these lines, we need to account for the mobilization of land, sea, and air space as well as subterranean and outer space and the multiple dimensionality of virtual or cyberspace. Taking our cue from experiments in narrative, and narrative theories that have attempted to explain them, we might further consider spatial historiography as not only “archaeological” (à la Foucault) or “architextual” (à la Genette), but multi-linear, hypertextual, and topographical. For if history is indeed predicated on a recognition of narrative emplotment in time, as Hayden White suggests with reference to Paul Ricoeur’s study Time and Narrative, then the reshaping of emplotment in fiction should help us further rethink how history may also be coming into greater conceptual relief, especially since the global changes that have taken place after World War II. The term “hypermodernity” may be useful here in order to emphasize the spaces of the modern world that are not necessarily more advanced or improved, but simply powered to a higher degree. Highlighting the trope of the “hyper” rather than the “post” should also help us better understand the distinction between

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350 According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “relief” entered into the English language from the French relever, which in turn derives from the Latin relevare, “to raise again.” To relieve is defined in such diverse ways as: to raise or rescue a person from trouble, difficulty or danger; to bring assistance; to free from siege; to free or clear from obligation; to give legal relief; to assist or help in poverty or necessity; to feed, sustain or nurture; to ease or free from sorrow, fear, doubt or other source of discomfort; to widen or open up; to mitigate; to release from guard, watch or duty; to restore, set up or erect again; to make something stand out; to render prominent or distinct; to stand out in relief; and so on. Relief, in turn, can further stand for that which is left or given up; the remains of a thing; a payment; and deliverance (esp. in Law) from hardship, burden or grievance, as in remedy or redress.

351 For example, Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language (New York: Vintage, 1982) and The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences (New York: Routledge, 2001)

Arendt’s bi-polar world of Cold War superpowers and the post-Cold War world of American “hyperpower.”

With all of this in mind, let us focus more closely on how imaginative reformations of history in fiction can help us question the role that historical facts play in public discourse, how they are written, and to whose ends. Along the way, I hope to show how the historical novel is necessarily also a topographical novel, and in turn how historiography is often also a form of topography. I am thus arguing along with Dominick LaCapra that, although literature often has a “second-class status” in relation to history, and as such is often used as an example to merely “give us a ‘feel’ for life in the past,” it can also help rethink and even change what history is in the first place. This is to suggest that any critical counter-history may well require a belief in the ability to rise up out of temporal emplotment, gain distance from historical events, and imagine that they could have taken place differently. Such an idea of historical relief could be taken in many directions, from humanist affirmation of the future and reparation of the past to reactionary historical denial; from memorial reflection on damage, trauma or loss to conservative consolation and commemoration; from progressive or anti-progressive revisionism to counter-factual speculation about multiple dimensions of temporality. Above all, I would hope that it could open up space for critical reflection and change.

Whatever we take the spatialization of history to mean, it seems fair to argue that it has intensified to a large extent not only through what David Harvey has called the “time-space compression” of postmodernity, but also through earlier modernist developments in what Joseph Frank has called “spatial form” and Stephen Kern has called the “culture of time and space.” As countless other scholars have suggested, this was no doubt accelerated over the twentieth century by technological developments in mobility and telecommunications, such as the radio, the telegraph, the telephone, the cinema, the automobile, and the airplane. Also crucial to note in this context is the globalization of warfare. Although less often recognized, the development of long-range weapons had profound effects on aesthetic conceptions of time and space from Apollinaire’s war poems to Picasso’s Guernica. For instance, it was during World War II that Borges penned his famous story “The Garden of Forking Paths,” which, in addition to its memorable fantasies

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353 This term was coined by Hubert Védrine, who used it to describe the United States as “dominant or predominant in all categories” in his 1999 book France in an Age of Globalization. As William Safire later observed in The New York Times (6/22/2003), the prefix “hyper” has been on the rise at least since 1963, when Carrefour opened its first “hypermarché” in France. Also in the early 1960s, the American computer programmer Theodor Holm Nelson developed a notion of “non-sequential writing” that he termed “hypertext.”

354 LaCapra, Dominic. History and Criticism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 126


358 Major arguments for (or against) technological or media determinism in the twentieth century include works by Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger in the inter-war German context; Thorstein Veblen, Lewis Mumford, Marshall McLuhan, Harold Innis and Hugh Kenner, and Neil Postman in North America; and more recent scholars like Jean Baudrillard, Friedrich Kittler, and Lev Manovich. Thomas Friedman admits to being a technological determinist directly in his book The World Is Flat.

359 The extensive work of Paul Virilio is a major exception to this generalization
of multiple dimensions and Chinese mysticism, ultimately centers on a British bombing campaign during World War I.

Before focusing on the spatialization of narrative form in the twentieth century, we should first acknowledge that historical fiction has in many ways always been concerned with topographical space, as evinced even by the Scottish romantic novel that helped pioneer the genre in Europe. Published in 1814, Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley* opens with an explanation of its title character’s namesake by connecting history and topography directly: “I had only to seize upon the most sounding and euphonic surname that English history or topography affords, and elect it at once as the title of my work, and the name of my hero.” As we read on, it soon becomes clear just how significant geographical elevation was in the history of Britain, for it was in the Scottish Highlands that the Jacobite Rebellion gained most of its force. Although at first Waverley is stuck in books, feeling lost and unsettled in the northern English countryside as “time…hung heavy in his hands,” it is just this imaginative, romantic bent that eventually leads him to rise up and join the Jacobites in the name of the Young Pretender. In this way, Scott’s novel reminds us that “pretending” is not just a question of fiction, but could also mean an active political claim to realization (in the case of Waverley, the pretension to reverse the ban on Catholic leadership and restore the House of Stuart to the British throne).

The use of spatial form to represent history is even more prominent in modernist fiction, as LaCapra argues in his discussion of Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*. Yet in this novel, instead of a romantic call to arms, we are invited to dwell in a more mournful and reflective experience of time. Without stating it directly, LaCapra recognizes that such spatialization was a traumatic after-effect of the damage caused by World War I: “The setting of the novel is in keeping with the bracketing of disruptive historical events and forces,” he argues. “And periodically, violent events threaten to burst their brackets and erupt catastrophically. The control of them is a matter of tact and style in the largest sense, for violence is always just below the surface and transgression on the threshold.”

This idea of “bracketing” may well derive from Husserl’s concept of *epoché* or phenomenological reduction, the act of suspending judgment about the natural for the sake of analysis. But no doubt Walter Benjamin also provides much of the theoretical underpinnings for LaCapra’s argument, although he is only cited in passing in this essay. Following from Freud’s argument about the temporal belatedness [Nachträglichkeit] of mourning and melancholia, Benjamin argues in his study of the baroque *Tragödie* that mourning emerges mainly as a spatial form of circular repetition and recurrence. More recently, Judith Butler has taken this argument to another level in suggesting that a sense of loss may constitute all forms of subjectivity: “Benjamin remarks that melancholia spatializes, and that its effort to reverse or suspend time produces ‘landscapes’ as its signature effect. One might profitably read the Freudian topography that melancholy occasions as precisely such a spatialized landscape of the mind.”

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361 Scott, Sir Walter. *Waverley*, 73
363 La Capra, 140-141
thoughtful consideration, but it also leaves us wondering: is there not also a progressive, forward-moving potential to memory and historiographic space? In fact, Benjamin himself suggests this in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” For instead of calling for a melancholic gaze onto the history of destruction in his discussion of Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus*, Benjamin argues for a perspective that, although suspended in the air and turned toward the past, is at the same time propelled into the future by an irresistible storm that he calls “Progress.” It is according to this vision of transcendence through immanence that Benjamin argues against traditional historicist approaches to “homogeneous and empty time” and for an engaged and immanent history of the present: “History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous and empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*],” 365 And as we shall see, it is the anxiety of this immanence that pervades many of the post-war American novels that emerged in the following decades.

**Dangling Men: Bellow and Heller**

Written in the form of a personal journal in the midst of World War II, Saul Bellow’s first novel *Dangling Man* opens with a critique of “the era of hard-boiled-dom,” which had already become well-established by American writers like Ernest Hemingway, Jack London, and Dashiell Hammett. Although Bellow was serving in the merchant marines when he published his novel in 1944, his fictional alter ego is a lonely *Luftmensch* 366 who is stuck biding his time while waiting to be called up for military duty. Instead of romanticizing the heroism of adventure in the name of stoic masculinity, he develops a passionate defense of introspective self-expression – a kind of “talking cure” for the ambivalence, demoralization, and dread that apparently plagued wartime American men far more than they were able to acknowledge. “For this is the era of hard-boiled-dom,” writes Bellow’s narrator, Joseph:

> Today, the code of the athlete, of the tough boy – an American inheritance, I believe, from the English gentleman – that curious mixture of striving, asceticism, and rigor, the origins of which some trace back to Alexander the Great – is stronger than ever. Do you have feelings? There are correct and incorrect ways of indicating them. Do you have an inner life? It is nobody’s business but your own. Do you have emotions? Strangle them. To a degree, everyone obeys this code. And it does admit of a limited kind of candor, a close-mouthed straightforwardness. But on the truest candor, it has an inhibitory effect. Most serious matters are closed to the hard-boiled. They are

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366 See my first chapter, “The Aesthetics of Aspiration,” for more on this figure in modernist literature and culture.
unpracticed in introspection, and therefore badly equipped to deal with opponents whom they cannot shoot like big game or outdo in daring.

If you have difficulties, grapple with them silently, goes one of their commandments. To hell with that! I intend to talk about mine, and if I had as many mouths as Siva has arms and kept them going all the time, I still could not do myself justice. In my present state of demoralization, it has become necessary for me to keep a journal – that is, to talk to myself – and I do not feel guilty of self-indulgence in the least. The hard-boiled are compensated for their silence; they fly planes or fight bulls or catch tarpon, whereas I rarely leave my room.\footnote{Bellow, Saul. \textit{Dangling Man} (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 2-3.}

As J.M. Coetzee observes in his short introduction, \textit{Dangling Man} is an existential diary-novel in the tradition of Turgenev’s \textit{Diary of a Superfluous Man}, Rilke’s \textit{Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge} and Sartre’s \textit{Nausea}. As a postwar American novel of metropolitan cynicism, it may also be read as an adult precursor to J.D. Salinger’s rather more famous classic, \textit{The Catcher in the Rye}.\footnote{For a surprisingly inventive comparison of \textit{The Catcher In the Rye} and \textit{Catch-22} as anxious products of America’s “containment culture” during the Cold War, see Nadel, Alain. \textit{Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age} (Duke University Press, 1995)} Character-driven and without much of a plot, \textit{Dangling Man} revolves around an inner-directed person who has lost the ability to feel balanced, engaged, or valuable in social life. While living in the densely-populated milieu of urban Chicago, Joseph is surrounded by people, but he still feels isolated and alone: “In a city where one has lived nearly all his life, it is not likely that he will ever be solitary; and yet, in a very real sense, I am just that.”\footnote{Bellow, \textit{Dangling Man}, 2}

According to the best-selling book \textit{The Lonely Crowd}, published only six years after Bellow’s novel, this sense of loneliness was in fact becoming commonplace in American culture with the mid-century rise of the metropolitan bourgeoisie. This classic sociological study, which David Riesman co-wrote with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney, attempted to explain how this demographic shift made “inner-directed” and “tradition-directed” behavior seem increasingly outmoded in comparison to “other-directed” behavior. In their terms, inner-directed types depend on a “psychological gyroscope” that keeps them “on course” through personal self-reliance, while tradition-directed types adhere to established rules and norms, and other-directed types move about their environment with the help of a “social radar” that is “sensitized to the expectations and preferences of others.”\footnote{Riesman, David, et al. \textit{The Lonely Crowd} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 8} Not only have people become less grounded by traditional and inner convictions, they argue, but “social climbing itself may be called into public question.” And thus, as a result, “it is no longer clear which way is up even if one wants to rise, for with the growth of the new middle class the older, hierarchical patterns disintegrate, and it is not easy to compare ranks among the several sets of hierarchies that do exist.”\footnote{Riesman, David, et al. \textit{The Lonely Crowd}, 47}
urban middle-class, it has nonetheless remains remarkably prescient for later debates about the rise in social networking and the curiously concomitant decline in social capital.\footnote{One may cite many examples here, from Manuel Castells’ pioneering study, \textit{The Rise of Network Society} (London: Wiley, 1996) to Robert Putnam’s popular bestseller, \textit{Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community} (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2001).} One reason for the early popularity and influence of \textit{The Lonely Crowd} in particular may be that Riesman and his co-writers wrote more like literary critics than social scientists, appealing to metaphorical tropes and typological ideals instead of empirical absolutes. For instance, in one particularly evocative passage, they refer to their use of metaphor directly:

This metaphor of the gyroscope, like any other, must not be taken literally. It would be a mistake to see the inner-directed man as incapable of learning from experience or as insensitive to public opinion in matters of external conformity. He can receive and utilize certain signals from outside, provided that they can be reconciled with the limited maneuverability that his gyroscope permits him. His pilot is not quite automatic.\footnote{Riesman, David, et al. \textit{The Lonely Crowd}, 16}

Such spatial metaphors of psychological balance are also important in \textit{Dangling Man} (and, as we shall see, the figure of the gyroscope is particularly key for the early novels of Thomas Pynchon). Defining himself early on as the title character of the novel, Bellow’s narrator Joseph describes his sense of simultaneous suspension and oscillation as being like dangling from a string or swinging from a rope:

[T]here is nothing to do but wait, or dangle, and grow more and more dispirited. It is perfectly clear to me that I am deteriorating, storing bitterness and spite which eat like acids at my endowment of generosity and good will. But the seven months’ delay is only one of the sources of my harassment. Again, I sometimes think of it as the backdrop against which I can be seen swinging. It is still more. Before I can properly estimate the damage it has done me I shall have to be cut down.\footnote{Bellow, \textit{Dangling Man}, 4}

While this may seem hopeless or pathetic, it is not tragic. For as Todd Gitlin suggests in his forward to \textit{The Lonely Crowd}, American culture was gradually turning away from transcendent aspirations of \textit{becoming} and toward a more immanent appreciation of \textit{being}:

It is likely that not only the knowledge base but also the cultural aspirations of most Americans have changed. No longer do Americans take pleasure in being stumped, suggesting (in true gyroscopic fashion) that there might be more to learn in the course of their lives. Today, in the name of “self-esteem,” they are “sensitive” to their own weaknesses; they need to demonstrate how much they
already know. “I am somebody” replaces “I will someday be somebody.”

It is due to his increasing anxieties about this shift that Joseph feels off-balance, as if his internal gyroscope were, in Riesman’s words, “spinning too fast, with the danger of hysterical outcomes.” Take this even further, and we eventually reach what James Wood has called “hysterical realism” in his bitter critique of Anglo-American novelists from Thomas Pynchon to Zadie Smith. While it would be a stretch to extend this accusation all the way back to *Dangling Man*, especially since Bellow’s protagonist appears to free himself from his angst in the end (and since Wood is in fact an ardent fan of his work), most of the story does revolve around what Joseph calls his “cyclical distress.” It is ultimately because he finds a way to appreciate the absurd irony of his predicament that he calls his life-story a “bureaucratic comedy,” and in turn concludes that “there is an element of the comic or fantastic in everyone.”

Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* may also be characterized as a bureaucrat comedy, although it is obviously a far more extreme one, and in many ways it may be diagnosed as the first fully-fledged “hysterical realist” novel in the history of American postmodernism. While Bellow’s Joseph appears to gain relief from his dangling when he ultimately decides to enlist in the armed services at the end of the novel, Heller’s Yossarian remains suspended in a cyclical crisis of eternal recurrence throughout his tour of duty, and even comes to accept the suggestive nickname “Yo-Yo” that has been bestowed upon him. Unable to break free, he is compelled to oscillate between reason and madness with the ironic recognition that hysterical realism may be his only means of survival: “Yossarian was a lead bombardier who had been demoted because he no longer gave a damn whether he missed or not. He had decided to live forever and die in the attempt, and his only mission each time he went up was to come down alive.”

Going up and down like this and always living to tell the tale, it is no surprise that Yossarian turns to paranoid fantasies of persecution and omnipotence in order to manage his predicament. In many ways, he explains, this goes back to earlier experiences of ethnic difference and alienation, which he had learned to overcome

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376 Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 45
378 Bellow, *Dangling Man*, 2-3
379 Bellow, *Dangling Man*, 16. While Bellow’s vision turned heavier and more paranoid in his next novel, *The Victim*, it eventually gave way to the exuberant levity of *The Adventures of Augie March*. In a review of this watershed novel for the *New York Times*, Robert Gorham Davis referred to the “sense of suspension” in Bellow’s early work directly: “…the world which impinges in ‘The Adventures of Augie March’ is so vivid and varied, and Augie himself is — up to a point — so impulsively active, that this novel does not have the sense of suspension, of waiting for something, which gave Mr. Bellow’s two earlier works their special atmosphere.” Davis, Robert Gorham, “Augie Just Wouldn’t Settle Down” in *The New York Times* (September 20, 1953).
380 See for example, pp. 126, 355, 361, and 428. As we shall see, this figure of the Yo-Yo recurs in significant ways throughout the early novels of Thomas Pynchon.
381 Heller, *Catch-22*, 29
by appealing to various established heroes from both popular culture and the history of the western canon:

As far back as he could recall, he explained to Clevinger with a patient smile, somebody was always hatching a plot to kill him. There were people who cared for him and people who didn’t, and those who hated him and were out to get him. They hated him because he was Assyrian. But they couldn’t touch him, he told Clevinger, because he had a sound mind in a pure body and was as strong as an ox. They couldn’t touch him because he was Tarzan, Mandrake, Flash Gordon. He was Bill Shakespeare. He was Cain, Ulysses, the Flying Dutchman; he was Lot in Sodom, Deirdre of the Sorrows, Sweeney in the nightingales among trees. He was miracle ingredient Z-247. He was –

“Crazy!” Clevinger interrupted, shrieking. “That’s what you are! Crazy!”

“–immense. I’m a real, slam-bang, honest-to-goodness, three-fisted humdinger. I’m a bona fide supraman.”

“Superman?” Clevinger cried. “Superman?”

“Supraman,” Yossarian corrected.382

The distinction here is a curious one. The comic-book character of Superman first appeared as a Herculean superhero in 1938, about six years before the time when Heller’s novel takes place, but it is an open question why Yossarian would define himself in contrast to this character given his other popular role-models. One likely possibility is that he was gesturing instead to Nietzsche’s idea of the Übermensch, who, unlike the alien of the comic books, is actually a human being who has managed to transcend the limitations of moral society through his own will to power. Given the Nazification of Nietzsche’s philosophy during this period, a gesture to this figure as opposed to the American do-gooder would have made perfect sense according to the deconstructive logic of Yossarian’s insubordinate irony.

Despite his posturing, Yossarian is of course still wracked with fear. At one point he also admits this – although he is also clear to note that there is no shame in it:

“I’m afraid.”

“That’s nothing to be ashamed of,” Major Major counseled him kindly. “We’re all afraid.”

“I’m not ashamed,” Yossarian said. “I’m just afraid.”383

Humor is obviously Yossarian’s primary defense mechanism, and similarly, Heller’s novel adopts a form of ironic levity that works to counterbalance the terrifying gravity of the war. At one point, when Yossarian’s plane is hit by enemy fire, the

383 Heller, Catch-22, 102
experience is described as one of falling as well as dangling: “Oh, God! he had shrieked beseechingly through lips that could not open as the plane fell and he dangled without weight by the top of his head....” Just as he feels both weight and weightlessness in this moment of crisis, the novel represents him constantly wavering between fear and humor in the crisis-time of his everyday life. Although he cries out to God, it appears a meaningless exclamation, as the novel generally excludes the possibility of divinity or salvation.

Shortly after this scene, we even find the Chaplain starting to “waver” with regard to his faith, which had previously kept him one of the most oriented and grounded characters in the novel. “So many things were testing his faith,” we read, so much so that, thinking back to the story of the Tower of Babel, he even starts to question the existence of an almighty God above as well as the very difference between up and down:

Had almighty God, in all His infinite wisdom, really been afraid that men six thousand years ago would succeed in building a tower to heaven? Where the devil war heaven? Was it up? Down? There was no up or down in a finite but expanding universe in which even the vast, burning, dazzling, majestic sun was in a state of progressive decay that would eventually destroy the earth too.

As we shall see, such scientific questions about space, time, and the cosmos became much more pronounced in postmodern American fiction in the following decades. While Pynchon became obsessed with the idea of entropy in particular, it was Heller’s friend Kurt Vonnegut who became most concerned with the trauma of destruction in a Godless universe.

**Vonnegut’s Historical Relief**

Toward the beginning of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut’s narrator turns to the Bible in an attempt to understand the destruction he witnessed in Germany during the war. Coming upon the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, he reminds us that Lot’s wife was punished for turning back to witness the destruction of the fallen city she had left behind. (The association was in fact not his own, as the allied bombing of Hamburg was actually called “Operation Gomorrah” by Arthur Harris, the commander of the British Royal Air Force). The moral of this cautionary Biblical tale, as many have read it, is that we should keep moving forward instead of looking back and confronting terror head-on. Yet although Vonnegut admits that paralyzed memory is certainly no “fun” and in fact leads to “failure,” he ultimately stands up for horrified historical reflection in his attempt to account for the bombing of Dresden. Just as Benjamin celebrated the “angel of history” in his idiosyncratic

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384 Heller, *Catch-22*, 225
385 Heller, *Catch-22*, 285
interpretation of Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus*, Vonnegut’s narrator defends Lot’s wife in order to develop his ironic defense of lost causes:

I looked through the Gideon Bible in my motel room for tales of great destruction. The sun was risen upon the Earth when Lot entered into Zo-ar, I read. Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of Heaven; and He overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground.

So it goes.

Those were vile people in both these cities, as is well known. The world was better off without them.

And Lot’s wife, of course, was told not to look back where all those people and their homes had been. But she *did* look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human.

So she was turned into a pillar of salt. So it goes.

People aren’t supposed to look back. I’m certainly not going to do it anymore.

I’ve finished my war book now. The next one I write is going to be fun. This one is a failure, it had to be, since it was written by a pillar of salt. ¹³⁸⁶

Vonnegut’s humor is not just ironic or dark, it aims for tragicomic relief. In what could simply be a depressing reflection on war, damage and trauma, the lighthearted refrain “so it goes” instead works to temporarily relieve the burden of the past, thereby enabling the story to move on. As much as the novel depends on nominally anti-humanist devices of boyish vulgarity and pornographic fantasy, it does so to inoculate what is otherwise its radical humanist earthiness. Masquerading as a wild and immature science fiction tale that escapes the here and now for alien worlds and other dimensions, it could just as well be read as a warped sentimental novel of captivity and desire. Thus although it verges on cynical reason whenever it confronts scenes of violence, injury and death, it ultimately resounds in sympathy, praising Lot’s wife for looking back because, after all, “it was so human.”

As we eventually learn, “so it goes” is what the alien Tralfamadorians say about dead people. Billy Pilgrim explains: “When a Tralfamadorian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in a bad condition in that particular moment, but that the same person is just fine in plenty of other moments. Now, when I myself hear that somebody is dead, I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people, which is ‘So it goes.’” ³⁸⁷ The Tralfamadorian understanding of time that Billy comes to accept is one of peacefully

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³⁸⁷ Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 27
structured space, a kind of “deep temporality” that lends plural unity to the weight of “historicality,” to use Paul Ricoeur’s terms. What keeps this space-time continuum from turning into the kind of dull “within-timeness” reminiscent of Edwin Abbot’s *Flatland* is the meaning to be found in depth. Although Tralfamadorian books have “no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects,” their readers nonetheless maintain a formal appreciation of three-dimensional space: “What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time.” In turn, although they know how the world will end, indeed that it will always end no matter what might be done in the effort to prevent it, they still find relief in the sense that it is fundamentally built (or “emplotted,” as Ricoeur would say) in time: “The moment is structured that way.”

This would seem to be an argument for historical inevitability, but the novel ultimately counters such determinist structuralism by highlighting the transfigurative power of the historical imagination; as Umberto Eco once wrote, “The sense of history provides a relief from hyperreality.” Are the other-worldly Tralfamadorians really to be believed? The novel puts their existence into doubt, suggesting that they could just as well have been invented by Billy’s science-fiction-enlivened imagination. Not only does his alien abduction story bear suspicious resemblance to tales by the Philip K. Dick-like writer Kilgore Trout, but we also learn that Billy and his war buddy Eliot Rosewater found solace in Trout’s novels after the war. It is with the aid of these counter-factual histories that they develop the creative ability, what Nietzsche called “plastic power” [*plastische Kraft*], to have their sense of history come into relief: “They had both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in war…..So they were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe. Science fiction was a big help.”

It is through this kind of reconstructive, utopian fantasy that Billy Pilgrim is able to see World War II and the rise of Hitler occurring in time-reverse, so that the dead return to life, the destruction disappears into air, and Hitler and everyone else eventually revert to babies again. While waiting at home for a Tralfamadorian flying saucer to pick him up and take him into space, he turns on the television and finds a movie about the war playing on the screen: “He came slightly unstuck in time, saw the late movie backwards, then forwards again. It was a movie about American bombers in the Second World War and the gallant men who flew them.” After seeing all the events of the war backwards, the story eventually ends with a laughably Biblical beginning:

The American fliers turned in their uniforms, became high school kids. And Hitler turned into a baby, Billy Pilgrim supposed. That wasn’t in the movie. Billy was extrapolating. Everybody turned into a baby, and all humanity,

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388 Quoted in White, *The Content of the Form*, 51.
389 Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 88
390 Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 117
393 Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 101
without exception, conspired biologically to produce two perfect people named Adam and Eve, he supposed.\(^{394}\)

Thus, instead of developing a merely depressing picture of the past, Vonnegut’s novel allows its hapless hero to discover alternative temporal dimensions that apparently help him to rise up out of the paralyzing effects of historical damage.\(^{395}\) As it turns out, this historical relief is not only enabled by technology and science fiction, but it also comes to be embodied in the figure of a woman who makes a living from mass culture.\(^{396}\) When Billy Pilgrim first sees Montana Wildhack, the porn star who becomes his fantasy playmate, he finds himself re-envisioning Dresden before its destruction: “Billy switched on the floor lamp. The light from the single source threw the baroque detailing of Montana’s body into sharp relief. Billy was reminded of fantastic architecture in Dresden, before it was bombed.”\(^{397}\) Unlike the melancholic stuckness that Benjamin explored in the baroque Trauerspiel, the mise-en-scène of this spatialization of history is one of restorative fantasy. Its “relief” is not a form of cathartic release or conservative compensation,\(^{398}\) but rather a symptom of a perversely counter-historical imagination.\(^{399}\)

But what does it really mean to say that Slaughterhouse-Five is a counter-historical novel, let alone a politically engaged one? In order to address this, we need to recognize the historical context of its publication rather than just the history that it represents. Vonnegut’s novel came out in 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War, and in reflecting on the experience of an American soldier during World War II, it overtly defines itself as anti-war. “Over the years,” Vonnegut’s narrator tells us, “people I’ve met have often asked me what I’m working on, and I’ve usually replied that the main thing was a book about Dresden. I said that to Harrison Starr, the movie-maker, one time, and he raised his eyebrows and inquired, ‘Is it an anti-war book? ’ ‘Yes, I said. ‘I guess.’”\(^{400}\) Thus although it focuses on the

\(^{394}\) Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five, 74-5

\(^{395}\) In Philip K. Dick’s The Man in the High Castle, the “depressing” effects of history, and the power of hypothetical history to rise above them, are highlighted directly: “She seemed pensive, withdrawn, even a little depressed. The past makes people sad, he realized. Damn it; why did I have to bring it up?” Dick, Philip K. The Man In the High Castle (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 65

\(^{396}\) See Andreas Huyssen, “Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism’s Other” in After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism for a discussion of this common trope as it appears in European modernism.

\(^{397}\) Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five, 133

\(^{398}\) Arguments for relief in terms of release and compensation are developed in the work of Arnold Gehlen and Odo Marquard, respectively. See Theodor Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory (309) for a remarkably balanced discussion of Gehlen, and Christoph Menke’s The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida (171-2) for elaboration on Gehlen’s and Marquard’s opposition to Adorno. For critiques of the neo-conservative logic of their arguments, see Jürgen Habermas’s Philosophical Discourse of Modernity (3-4) and Andreas Huyssen’s Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia (pp. 25, 29, 252). See also Peter Sloterdijk’s more recent theory of historical metanoia, which he derives from the rhetorical term for retraction, revision, and correction rather than the theological concept of repentance, in Theory of the Post-War Periods: Observations on Franco-German Relations (New York: Springer, 2009).

\(^{399}\) According to Hannah Arendt’s study of Kant, it is only through the imagination that historical progress is able to come into being in the first place. (Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 79-89

\(^{400}\) Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five, 3
bombed Dresden during World War II, the novel positions itself in general opposition to all campaigns of militarized terror. Its topographical reflection on war-time destruction in the past is engaged not only for the sake of memorialization, but in order to critique the mobilization of the American military in the present.

As Vonnegut was writing, the United States was in the midst of bombing campaigns in Vietnam that would far outweigh the damage done in World War II. According to Sven Lindqvist’s remarkable book The History of Bombing, which is itself written in an experimental, multi-linear form, while the United States dropped two million tons of bombs on Germany, it used four times that in Vietnam, the equivalent in explosive power of about 640 attacks on Hiroshima. As Lindqvist argues, such bombing campaigns have generally aimed to “terrorize” civilians and destroy overall morale rather than strategically defeat enemy combatants, and in most cases, they have explicitly attempted to reduce foreign populations to the level of the “brute,” “savage” or “barbarian.” Thus, according to Lindqvist, the bombing of German cities was not actually intended to defeat the army but rather to destroy national morale, and in fact the Allied bombers ultimately avoided seizing the opportunity to help victims of concentration camps. In particular, he cites historian David Wyman’s estimate that, had the Allies agreed to bomb the gas chambers at Auschwitz as well as the factories, the lives of 100,000 to 500,000 Jews could have been saved.

Vonnegut’s novel does not advocate absolute pacifism in the face of violence and aggression, considering that wars may be unavoidable (like glaciers, as Harrison Starr claims), but it nonetheless positions the reader to oppose the violence of state-sponsored military terror. When Billy Pilgrim goes to a Lions Club meeting after his return home to Ilium, he finds himself listening to a major in the American Marines who reinforces his acceptance of war while simultaneously alienating the reader with war-mongering, primitivist rhetoric:

[The major] said that Americans had no choice but to keep fighting in Vietnam until they achieved victory or until the Communists realized that they could not force their way of life on weak countries….He was in favor of increased bombings, of bombing North Vietnam back into the Stone Age, if it refused to see reason.

Although Billy “was not moved to protest the bombing of North Vietnam, did not shudder about the hideous things he himself had seen bombing do,” his response is presented as uncomfortably distant and estranging, as if to effect a shudder in the reader.

What is the importance of a shudder? According to Theodor Adorno, it is the very truth content of art itself. If we accept for the time being his suggestion that “the artwork’s enigmatic alness is the shudder,” then we must also recognize that it appears not “in its living presence but as recollection.” As such, shuddering requires a return to terror in the act of remembrance, and occurs not simply in the face of terror but in its “afterimage.” Like Benjamin’s conception of the melancholic Trauerspiel, Adorno’s theory of art follows Freud’s

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402 Lindqvist, A History of Bombing, 92-211
403 Lindqvist, A History of Bombing 100-101
404 Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five, 60
405 Adorno, Theodor. Aesthetic Theory (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 286
law of Nachträglichkeit, or deferred or belated action, in its concern for registering past terror in the afterwardsness of aesthetic experience. This is the case regardless of when or where artworks are experienced, whether in a period of crisis or in a place of calm; as Adorno writes, “Even in a legendary better future, art could not disavow remembrance of accumulated horror; otherwise its form would be trivial.”406 In opposition to repetitious circularity, which Adorno sees as characteristic of the culture industry, the shudder reflects aesthetic authenticity. “The authentic artists of the present,” he writes, “are those in whose works there trembles the aftershock of the most extreme terror.”407 This responsiveness to history bears the burden of terror and in turn carries it over through time. By negating mere sameness, art allows terror to be sublated (if not sublimated in its appeal to the power of the sublime); it is at the same time shaken off and preserved, overcome and incorporated: “Scars of damage and disruption are the modern’s seal of authenticity; by their means, art desperately negates the closed confines of the ever-same; explosion is one of its invariants.”408

The confrontation with terror in Slaughterhouse-Five is not just a sublation or sublimation of the past, however, but a form of engagement with the present. Thus in contrast to Adorno’s ambivalent appreciation of the modernist sublime, Vonnegut develops a more Brechtian alienation effect that estranges us from history so as to actively involve us in its making. This is what is at work in the novel’s representation of Tralfamadorian ahistoricism, for as wondrous, comforting, or fearless as their view of time and space might appear, it is never really to be believed. Both Billy’s religious faith and the Tralfamadorian ideas that he winds up preaching are predicated on acceptance rather than resistance or engagement. Instead of protesting the Vietnam war, Billy returns to ponder the framed prayer on his office wall, which appears again on the planet Tralfamadore when he sees it in the locket around Montana Wildhack’s neck; the prayer reads: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom always to tell the difference.”409 Believing he is following this faithfully, Billy winds up sacrificing courage and wisdom for the sake of serenity alone. Although the Tralfamadorian conception of historical determinism makes him feel like an insect trapped in amber, he comes to accept the feeling that his experience is structured or emplotted in time. And so it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that “Among the things Billy could not change were the past, the present and the future.”410

Hence the irony in the refrain “so it goes.” As much as such determinism is upheld by the Tralfamadorians and accepted by Billy, it is not the logic of the novel, which imagines that we can also become potentially “unstuck” in time. It is only according to this anti-determinist logic that corpses can be counted as losses rather than “improvements,” as the Tralfamadorians would otherwise have us believe in their appropriation of Darwin: “On Tralfamadore, says Billy Pilgrim, there isn’t much interest in Jesus Christ. The Earthling figure who is most engaging to the Tralfamadorian mind, he says, is Charles Darwin – who

406 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 324
408 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 23
409 Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five, 60 and 209
410 Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five, 60
taught that those who die are meant to die, that corpses are improvements. So it goes.”

Unlike the Tralfamadorian appreciation of what Ricoeur would call “deep temporality” and Benjamin would critique as “homogenous, empty time,” Vonnegut’s novel registers loss and damage as sad facts of history while at the same time imagining possibilities for both confronting and overcoming them. Rather than dwelling exclusively on the weight of such facts, it upholds the power of fiction for the sake of historical mobility.

When Billy relates his memory of walking through Dresden just after its destruction, he does not dwell on images of shock or terror, but rather on a larger sense of uncanny otherworldliness: “It was like the moon.” W.G. Sebald uses this same metaphor of the “lunar landscape” to describe the flattened ruins of German cities caused by Allied bombs, as do many of the writers he cites in his major essay “Air War and Literature.” Such images of otherworldly nature evince a sense of the “natural history of destruction,” which Sebald argues was prevalent in the post-War German imagination. At the same time, however, Sebald acknowledges certain de-naturalizing, counter-historical responses to this destruction that emerged on the left. Among the German writers Sebald discusses, the one most akin to Vonnegut’s American response is perhaps Alexander Kluge, who, despite his rhetoric of nature rising up against itself, also used de-naturalizing strategies of Brechtian alienation, critical theory and science fiction to question the repression or easy acceptance of violence and destruction.

Like Vonnegut, Kluge turned to spatial images of vertical topography to understand this period of historical ruin; in his terms, civilians on the ground were forced to develop a “strategy from below” in order to survive the military “strategy from above.” And as Andreas Huyssen has observed in an essay on Sebald and the literature of air war, Kluge’s topographical critique is also related to the theory of history that he and Oskar Negt develop in their massive, three-volume book History and Stubbornness [Geschichte und Eigensinn]. Here, Negt and Kluge describe a rocket’s flight from the earth to the moon in order to consider how a spatial conception of history can help us imagine a release from the power of the past. Just as space flight enables a sense of release from planetary gravity (and moon walking is lighter than walking on the earth), they suggest that travel through historical time may also allow ways of finding freedom from the weight of traumatic repetition. This theory of release is distinct from neo-conservative arguments for consolation or acceptance, however, for they argue that actual release is impossible and as such can only be imagined. According to their metaphor of rocket flight, just as the conceptual “abatic point” at which gravity is released never actually takes place during the travel from one planet to another, the weight of history can never fully be escaped in the course of time. Just as other planets will inevitably exert their force on a traveler who escapes the gravity of earth, the weight of the past will always retain its pull on the present.

411 Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five, 210
412 Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five, 179
414 For a critique of this and many of the questions that follow, see Andreas Huyssen’s “Rewritings and New Beginnings: W.G. Sebald and the Literature on the Air War” in Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory (especially pp. 152-154).
In this way, as much as arguments for historical relief call for critical engagement, they are based less on empirical evidence than on the utopian imagination. Such a utopian mode of history treats science as not simply a matter of practical application or pure reason, but as a means by which to continue questioning. Its method of research is not just aimed at getting the facts right, for it recognizes all too clearly that precision and accuracy can be used as much for damage and destruction as progress and advancement. Instead, it adopts a method akin to what Paul Celan called “topological research” in his famous speech “The Meridian,” which he presented after receiving the Georg Buchner Prize in 1960:

And topological research? Certainly.
But in the light of what is still to be searched for: in a u-topian light.
And the human being? The physical creature? In this light.  

Pynchon and the Irony of Immanence

There is little room for either utopian hope or humanist relief in Thomas Pynchon’s sprawling universe of wartime paranoia. In this respect we might say that he follows in the footsteps of Heller far more than those of Vonnegut or Bellow. A generation younger than each of them, Pynchon attended Cornell University over a decade after Vonnegut left in 1943 to serve in the war, and, after settling for a while in California instead of Chicago, where both Vonnegut and Bellow lived for many years, he remained famously distant from other writers as well as from the public at large. His closest literary friend and colleague appears to have been Richard Fariña, who died in a motorcycle accident in 1966, only two days after publishing his novel *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up To Me*. Pynchon later dedicated *Gravity’s Rainbow* to Fariña and also wrote the introduction to the re-publication of *Been Down So Long*, in which he described how they first met at Cornell in the 1950s, how both moved to northern California in the early 1960s in search of American counter-culture, and how both exchanged drafts of their early writings before becoming published novelists.

Benny Profane, the comic, neo-picaresque protagonist in the first part of Pynchon’s *V.*, is a former Navy officer who bears many similarities to Fariña’s Gnossos Papadopoulos, Vonnegut’s Billy Pilgrim, and Heller’s Yossarian, the last of whom is similarly interpellated by the handle “yo-yo.” Even before the novel begins, Pynchon introduces us to the yo-yo motif in the title to his first chapter, “In which Benny Profane, a schlemihl and human yo-

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416 For a major psychoanalytic interpretation of Pynchon’s paranoid imagination, which also briefly compares *Gravity’s Rainbow* to *Ulysses*, see Leo Bersani’s “Pynchon, Paranoia and Literature” in *Representations*, No. 25 (Winter, 1989)
417 Much of post-war-American literature and criticism can be traced to this fruitful period at Cornell. Pynchon began his studies there in 1953 but left after two years to serve in the U.S. Navy. After returning in 1957, he wrote for the *Cornell Writer*, befriended other young writers like Fariña and David Shetzline, and attended classes with M.H. Abrams (who began teaching there in 1945) and Vladimir Nabokov (who taught there from 1948 to 1959) before graduating in 1959. Harold Bloom also studied there as an undergraduate from 1947 to 1952, and Toni Morrison received her master’s in English there in 1955.
Here the Yiddish term schlemihl immediately points us to the fact that Benny is both Jewish (via his mother, his father’s family being Catholic) and a hopelessly incompetent bungler. His “yo-yoing” seems to be an unfortunate symptom of this condition, and represents not only “the picaro’s subjection to Fortune,” according to Theodore Kharpertian, but also his “pointless automatism and mechanism.” In the contemporary terms of The Lonely Crowd, while Profane is a somewhat more “other-directed” person than Bellow’s Joseph, his “psychological gyroscope” in similarly off-balance, and he ends up wandering with far less introspective depth. Aside from his experience “traveling up and down the east coast like a yo-yo,” Profane’s yo-yoing takes place mainly as a kind of underground flânerie in the New York subway system, as when he decides “on a whim to spend the day like a yo-yo, shuttling on the subway back and forth underneath 42nd Street, from Times Square to Grand Central and vice versa.” Yet even before he leaves his house on his way to the station, he trips on the way to the bathroom, cuts himself shaving, takes a shower without the hot and cold handles working properly, slips on a bar of soap, rips his towel while drying himself off, puts on his shirt backwards, and breaks his shoelace. “Being a schlemihl,” the narrator explains, “he’d known for years: inanimate objects and he could not live in peace.”

Only a little later do we learn the meaning of the second term in Pynchon’s sub-title, “apocheir,” a neologism that implies, at least etymologically, “far from” or “out of hand”:

If you look from the side at a planet swinging around in its orbit, split the sun with a mirror and imagine a string, it all looks like a yo-yo. The point furthest from the sun is called aphelion. The point furthest from the yo-yo hand is called, by analogy, apocheir.

According to this analogy, if the sun is pictured in the form of a yo-yo at the distant “apocheir,” and the planet is held by the hand at the aphelion, then the string is, by implication, the force of gravity that keeps the planet – and, by extension, the game-player’s hand – within the constant orbit of the sun. In turn, if Benny Profane is a “human yo-yo,” then it is his girlfriend Rachel Owlglass who commands his string with what Pynchon calls, with a further Freudian twist, an “umbilical tug.” Like a vertical version of Freud’s “fort-da” game, Profane’s Oedipal desires become subjected to the same repetitive, spatial play of gravitational and gyroscopic forces that seem to govern the rest of his life:

...and though they only thought about one another at random, though her yo-yo hand was usually busy at other things, now and again would come the invisible, umbilical tug, like tonight mnemonic, arousing, and he would

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419 Quoted in Grant, J. Kerry. A Companion to V. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 30
420 Pynchon, V., 2
421 Pynchon, V., 31
422 Pynchon, V., 31
423 Pynchon, V., 29-30.
wonder how much his own man he was. One thing he had to give her credit for, she'd never called it a Relationship.424

Pynchon’s trope of the yo-yo is thus exemplary of the way in which he connects gravitational physics and Oedipal psychology throughout his postwar fictional universe. Following the models of both Einstein and Freud, it shows us that, just as gravity is a force that brings bodies together, so too is desire. When Profane imagines that he has finally been let loose from these forces after he has sex with Rachel later in the novel (Chapter Eight, “In which Rachel gets her yo-yo back”), he quickly learns that, instead of becoming an autonomous human being, he is simply like a “sovereign or broken yo-yo,” inert and fallen and thus ultimately still mechanical and dependent:

Any sovereign or broken yo-yo must feel like this after a short time of lying inert, rolling, falling: suddenly to have its own umbilical string reconnected, and know the other end is in hands it cannot escape. Hands it doesn’t want to escape. Know that the simple clockwork of itself has no more need for symptoms of inutility, lonesomeness, directionlessness, because now it has a path marked out for it over which it has no control. That’s what the feeling would be, if there were such things as animate yo-yos. Pending any such warp in the world Profane felt like the closest thing to one and above her eyes began to doubt his own animateness.425

In addition to these phenomenological and psycho-sexual dynamics, Pynchon’s trope of the yo-yo also takes on overt political implications in the form of Yoyodyne, Inc., where, thanks to the Space/Time Employment agency, Profane ends up getting a temporary job as a night watchman. As we learn in both V. and The Crying of Lot 49, this fictional military-industrial company was founded by World War II-veteran Clayton “Bloody” Chiclitz, who first became interested in yo-yos while running the Chiclitz Toy Company in Nutley, New Jersey. After discovering a way to develop simple gyroscopes into complex weapons technologies in the 1940s, he converted his toy company into a weapons factory for the U.S. government after the war, and opened the first Yoyodyne plants on Long Island and in San Narciso, California, a town imagined to be located just east of Los Angeles.426  Although the

424 Pynchon, V., 23. This image of the yo-yo string as umbilical chord appears again a little later: “Every dime she gets out of your pocketbook adds one more strand to this cable that ties you two together like an umbilical cord, making it that much harder to cut, making her survival that much more in danger if the cord ever is cut.” (45)
425 Pynchon, V., 229
426 Pynchon, Thomas. V., 240-1: “In the 1940s Yoyodyne had been breezing along comfortably as the Chiclitz Toy Company, with one tiny independent-making shop on the outskirts of Nutley, New Jersey. For some reason the children of America conceived around this time a simultaneous and psychopathic craving for simple gyroscopes, the kind which are set in motion by a string wound around the rotating shaft, something like a top. Chiclitz, recognizing the market potential there, decided to expand [. . .] Chiclitz started making gyro for the government. Before he knew it he was also in telemeter instrumentation, test-set components, small communications equipment. He kept expanding, buying, merging. Now less than ten years later he had built up an interlocking kingdom responsible for systems management, airframes, propulsion, command
“Bandalore” or “quiz” had existed in Europe for centuries, and similar devices have been traced back to the ancient Greeks, the term “yo-yo” actually comes from the Philippines, and the first American yo-yo factory was in fact also developed in Southern California in the mid-twentieth century. Founded in Santa Barbara in 1928 by Pedro Flores, who studied law at UC Berkeley and Hastings after immigrating to the United States from the Philippines, the Yo-Yo Manufacturing Company was the first to transform the traditional Filipino “yo-yo” (meaning “come-come” in Tagalog) into a mass-produced toy for modern Americans. We can only presume that Pynchon was aware of the colonial history behind this story of immigration and industry, but in any case there is no doubt that his idea of the yo-yo is closely connected to the history of American empire after World War II. For when Herbert Stencil visits the Yoyodyne plant on Long Island, he meets an engineer there named Kurt Mondaugen (in German, “Moon eyes”), who, we learn from a key passage in free indirect style, “had worked, yes, at Peenemunde, developing Vergeltungswaffe Eins and Zwei. The magic initial!”

And thus the trope of the yo-yo is revealed to be tied up not only with the mystery of V., that obscure object of desire for whom Stencil begins searching in 1945, but also with the history of German imperialism from its colonial period to the Third Reich. In the next chapter, “Mondaugen’s story,” which reads like a loose parody of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, we learn that the German engineer had spent his early adult years in Southwest Africa in the early 1920s, where he learned of the history of genocide that the Germans committed against the Hereros at the turn of the century. If Mondaugen is like Conrad’s narrator Marlow, then Lieutenant Weissmann, who served under the brutal General Lothar von Trotha, is a corollary to Kurtz, whose declaration toward the end of the novella is its most often quoted: “Exterminate all the brutes!” In Pynchon’s post-colonial version, however, this history ultimately leads up to the rise of Nazi racism and imperialism. For when Mondaugen and Weissmann both return to Germany, they end up working for Hitler’s cartels, and eventually become chief ballistics engineers for the Nazi military, for which they develop the V-1 and V-2 rockets. When they appear again in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, we find Chiclitz attempting to recruit them in order to transform his toy factory into a weapons lab. “There’s a great future in these V-weapons,” he asserts. “They’re gonna be really big.” Although he fails to convince Weissmann to leave Germany, he does manage to recruit Mondaugen to work for his Yoyodyne plant on Long Island, and thereby manages to adopt German imperial know-how to serve the interests of the United States government.

Mondaugen thus appears like a fictional version of Wernher von Braun, the Nazi inventor of the V-2 rocket who was recruited to work for the United States government after the war through the secret plan known as Operation Paperclip. While *V.* only refers to this connection in passing, *Gravity’s Rainbow* largely revolves around the suggestion that, instead of simply defeating the Third Reich in World War II, the United States in fact

427 Flores was eventually bought out by Donald Duncan in 1930, as explained on the website for what is now known as the Duncan Yo-Yo: http://www.yo-yo.com/history.asp#

428 Pynchon, Thomas. *V.*, 241

429 Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, 538
assimilated the phallic aggression of the German military-industrial complex into its own burgeoning empire.\(^\text{430}\) This is what is at stake in Pynchon’s presumably ironic quotation from Wernher von Braun in the novel’s epigraph: “Nature does not know extinction; all it knows it transformation. Everything science has taught me, and continues to teach me, strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death.” Although referring to transformation, this belief in spiritual continuity ultimately suggests a faith in divine immanence instead of actual change or transcendence. And it is just this ideology of immanence that Pynchon satirizes with such brutal irony.

Pynchon suggests the continuity between German and American imperialism most directly in the voice of Gottfried (“God-peace” in German) toward the end of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Here, shortly before he is sacrificed by his adopted father, Weissmann, Gottfried critiques the way in which the colonial European “mission to propagate death” was taken over by the United States after winning the war in the “old metropolis”:

And sometimes I dream of discovering the edge of the World. Finding that there *is* an end. My mountain gentian always knew. But it has cost me so much. America *was* the edge of the World. A message from Europe, continent-sized, inescapable. Europe had found the site for its Kingdom of Death, that special Death the West had invented….In Africa, Asia, Amerindia, Oceania, Europe came and established its order of Analysis and Death. What it could not use, it killed or altered. In time the death-colonies grew strong enough to break away. But the impulse to empire, the mission to propagate death, the structure of it, kept on. Now we are in the last phase. American Death has come to occupy Europe. It has learned empire from its old metropolis. But now we have only the structure left us, none of the great rainbow plumes, no fittings of gold, no epic marches over alkali seas.\(^\text{431}\)

Here and throughout the novel, Pynchon’s understanding of phallic aggression as a kind of “death drive” behind the “impulse to empire” is no doubt indebted to the Freudian theories of Norman O. Brown’s 1959 academic cult classic *Life Against Death*,\(^\text{432}\) and his suggestion that colonial racism was a precursor to twentieth-century totalitarianism is closely related to Hannah Arendt’s theory of imperialism in the second volume of her study, *Origins of*_

\(^{430}\) Of course this is the meaning of Dr. Strangelove’s symptomatic “Sieg Heil” salute in *Dr. Strangelove: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Stanley Kubrick, 1964). Perhaps the darkest and most pointed satire of the Cold War “balance of power,” Kubrick’s iconic Cold War film, co-written with Peter George and Terry Southern, suggests that a repressed Nazi has not only been adopted by the U.S. military, but is actually its chief mastermind. The character of Dr. Strangelove is curiously similar to Ian Fleming’s Orientalist villain Dr. No, especially considering their artificial hands, and arguably harks back to Fritz Lang’s mad scientists Rotwang and Dr. Mabuse, Mary Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein, and, of course, the legend of Faust.

\(^{431}\) Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, 722

\(^{432}\) Brown, Norman O. *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1959). Pynchon’s use of the term “polymorphous perversity” is the most over reference to Brown’s theory.
Several critics have recognized these connections, but what is less often discussed, yet equally crucial to understand, is how Pynchon also implicates the United States in this history. Above all, Pynchon imagines the war as an international, trans-Atlantic competition of death drives; in the words of Gottfried: “American Death has come to occupy Europe. It has learned empire from its old metropolis.” In many ways, this is meaning behind the mysterious and chaotic “Zone,” which may have intertextual connections to Apollinaire’s Parisian poem and William Burroughs’ hybrid “Interzone,” but in its most literal sense refers to the American zone of occupation that was established on “VE” day (“Victory In Europe”). If “Sado-anarchism” is its defining characteristic, as Pynchon notes, then the character known as Thanatz, whose name suggests his obvious interest in Thanatos, “is its leading theoretician in the Zone these days.”

A similar argument that the United States has “learned empire” through a kind of mimetic battle with totalitarianism has also been made by the critic Jonathan Schell, who draws from Arendt’s theories of imperialism and totalitarianism in order to develop his passionate and compelling argument for nuclear disarmament. According to Schell, although the United States is the only country to have used nuclear bombs to exterminate a civilian population, it did not have an official policy of extermination in the way that Nazi Germany did, and so in many ways its bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki represents the persistence of totalitarian violence rather than the victory of liberal progress. This point is worth taking seriously, but unfortunately Schell takes it further when he makes the more dubious suggestion that such violence ultimately belonged to the logic of German rather than American national ideology:

Without becoming jingoistic about the United States or overlooking the dark passages in its history, including slavery and the near extinction of Native Americans, it must be said that the United States was no Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia. History had in a sense played a trick on the world, as it often does. If history had been logical, it would have given the bomb to Hitler, whose policies (including his suicidal inclinations) so clearly pointed in the direction of extermination on a new scale.

Schell is no doubt right in his overall argument that the threat of violent extermination has continued to define global geopolitics not only throughout the Cold War balance of power,
but also into our current, post-Cold War age of nuclear terror. However, his counter-factual claims about historical logic are suspiciously speculative, and despite his references to American atrocities, there seems to be an ideological fantasy of American exceptionalism behind his otherwise compelling assertion that, if nuclear weapons are not eventually abolished, “totalitarianism will appear to have been a harsh and effective tutor to liberalism, which was its apt pupil.”\footnote{Schell, \textit{The Fate of the Earth and the Abolition}, xxxix.}

Pynchon shares a similar fantasy of America’s lost innocence, as exemplified by Chiplitz’s transformation from a toy manufacturer to a weapons contractor, which may be based less on Arendt’s critique of European imperialism than an undercurrent of Puritan ideology. For in pointing to Germany as the source of American imperial violence in the atomic age, both Schell and Pynchon ultimately end up discounting the history of the United States as an imperial nation-state long before Germany even existed as a nation.\footnote{In fact, at least according to biographer John Toland, Hitler actually regarded the imprisonment and massacre of Native Americans as an admirable model to be imitated when he first began developing his plans for the extermination of Jews in Europe: “Hitler's concept of concentration camps as well as the practicality of genocide owed much, so he claimed, to his studies of English and United States history. He admired the camps for Boer prisoners in South Africa and for the Indians in the wild West; and often praised to his inner circle the efficiency of America’s extermination – by starvation and uneven combat – of the red savages who could not be tamed by captivity.” Toland, John. \textit{Adolf Hitler} (Doubleday & Company, 1976), 702.}

For instance, instead of tracing the American ideology of metropolitan empire back to John Winthrop’s 1630 sermon “City on a Hill,” Pynchon dwells on Fritz Lang’s 1928 film \textit{Metropolis}, which depicts “a corporate City state where technology was the source of power, the engineer worked closely with the administrator, the masses labored unseen far underground, and ultimate power lay with a single leader at the top.”\footnote{Pynchon, \textit{Gravity’s Rainbow}, 578} This cinematic vision of the totalitarian metropolis also informs Pynchon’s idea of the “colonies of that Mother City mapped wherever the enterprise is systematic death,”\footnote{Pynchon, \textit{Gravity’s Rainbow}, 76} as well as the fantastical “Vertical City” that appears toward the end of the novel: “By now the City is grown so tall that elevators are long-haul affairs, with lounges inside….Before the Vertical solution, all transport was, in effect, two-dimensional.”\footnote{Pynchon, \textit{Gravity’s Rainbow}, 735} In contrast to such vertical cities, Gwenhidwy’s vision of London, which he calls the “City Paranoiac,” is based on the view from below and what he calls the “Threat From The East.” As he explains:

\begin{quote}
In some cities the rich live upon the heights, and the poor are found below. In others the rich occupy the shoreline, while the poor must live inland. Now in London, here is a gra-dient of wretchedness? Increasing as the rivers widens to the sea….The true reason is the Threat From The East, you see. And the South: form the mass of Eu-rope, certainly. The people out here were meant to go down first. We’re expendable: those in the West End, and north of the river are not. Oh, I don’t mean the Threat has this or that specific shape. Political, no. If the City Paranoiac dreams, it’s not accessible to us.\footnote{Pynchon, \textit{Gravity’s Rainbow}, 172-3}
\end{quote}
The reason this fantasy is paranoid is that it refers to the entire history of London rather than the wartime experience of the Blitz, when cross-channel rockets did indeed threaten to destroy the city from both the East and the South.

Of course the central conceit of the novel is that the targets of these attacks are directly correlated with the locations in the city where Tyrone Slothrop has had a sexual liaison, and in turn, that the libido of this poor American soldier is somehow connected to the phallic aggression of the Nazi war machine. In this way, his body is revealed to be a kind of colonial “instrument” for the “white Metropolis” of imperial Germany: “His erection hums from a certain distance, like an instrument installed, wired by Them into his body as a colonial outpost here in our raw and clamorous world, another office representing Their white Metropolis far away.” In the analytical terms of Edwin Treacle, whom Pynchon’s narrator describes as “that most Freudian of psychical researchers,” Slothrop’s condition is both a “gift” of “psychokinesis” as well as an “anal-sadistic” symptom of the death drive: “He subconsciously needs to abolish all trace of the sexual Other, whom he symbolizes on his map, most significantly, as a star, that anal-sadistic emblem of classroom success which so permeates elementary education in America… In fact there is a much more complicated psychological explanation to this bizarre condition, for as we learn later, Slothrop may have been experimented on by Nazi scientists when he was a young child, and so he may have been a tool of their phallocentric war machine just like the rockets themselves.

The elements of phallocentrism in the novel are ultimately also put into question through the overarching metaphors of “centrifugal History” and the more centripetal – and potentially feminine or effeminizing – force of gravity. When we are first introduced to the character of Nora Dodson-Truck, she appears in distinct contrast to Treacle: “What do Edwin Treacle’s recent dreams of flight mean, especially as time-correlated with Nora Dodson-Trucks’s dreams of falling?” While both appear to have what we might call a vertical unconscious, his seems to be governed by aspirational levity, whereas hers appears to represent the consequences of gravity. Indeed, when she finally returns again in “The Counterforce” toward the end of the novel, she ultimately comes to see herself as the literal embodiment of Gravity itself:

In recent weeks, in true Messianic style, it has come clear to her that her real identity is, literally, the Force of Gravity. I am Gravity, I am That against which the Rocket must struggle, to which the pre-historic wastes submit and are transmitted to the very substance of History. . . .

In many ways, this brings us back not only to Ludwig Binswanger’s theory of flight and falling, which I discussed in my first chapter, but also to James Joyce. On the most basic level, Nora Dodson-Truck’s name suggests a conflation of Joyce’s wife, Nora, and his

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443 Pynchon, Gravity’s Rainbow, 285
444 Pynchon, Gravity’s Rainbow, 84
445 Pynchon, Gravity’s Rainbow, 46
446 Pynchon, Gravity’s Rainbow, 639
fictional character, Stephen Dedalus, for just as Joyce’s Stephen derives his patronymic from his father, Nora’s last name is taken from her husband, Stephen Dodson-Treek. More importantly, although her first-person voice is short-lived and appears in an easily-overlooked paragraph, it functions in some ways like Molly’s monologue at the end of *Ulysses* as a centralizing force to an otherwise sprawling narrative.

In fact *Ulysses* and *Gravity’s Rainbow* share so many common features that it’s hard to develop a convincing argument for why they might belong to completely opposing sides of a purported great divide between the modern and postmodern. Both adopt burlesque, ironic styles of comic levity that deconstruct distinctions between “high” and “low,” although only the latter is actually satirical (especially according to Northrop Frye’s conception of “militant irony”). Both play to a large extent with parabolic language – metaphor, allegory, symbolism – and thus deviate from established nineteenth-century conventions of realistic narration (especially what Roman Jakobson has called “metonymic realism”). In terms of spatial form, both could be described as circular narratives, although the former is more centripetal and horizontal while the latter is more centrifugal and vertical.

Both are literally structured around cities and metaphorically around organs of the body, suggesting a relationship between the metropolitan and the biological, although the former is more holistically corporeal while the latter critiques what we could call the biopolitics of phallocentrism. For while each episode of *Ulysses* is organized according to a different part of the body, *Gravity’s Rainbow* revolves mainly around the phallus, as if Tyrone Slothrop were forever stuck in “Lotus Eaters,” the episode of *Ulysses* corresponding to the genitalia. However, as narcissistic or masturbatory as Pynchon’s novel might at first appear, it is ultimately a cutting satire of phallocentrism rather than a romantic or decadent exploration of it.

Finally, and this is perhaps the most important point, both novels are set in and around urban spaces of the past, although only *Gravity’s Rainbow* is strictly speaking a historical novel (despite the fact that it is mostly written in the present tense), and its events

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448 As Steven Weisenburger notes, it is a mistake to call *Gravity’s Rainbow* parabolic in terms of spatial form, since its narrative adopts a combination of Christian, astrological, and other spatio-temporalities that are cyclical, if not “heterocyclical,” in a mode comparable to *Ulysses* (Weisenburger, 9). However, as I suggest here, both novels can be considered parabolic in the secondary sense of the word: the Greek *para* + bole means *throwing beside, juxtaposing, or comparing,* and gives us the related words *parabola* and *parable,* the former not only referring to a curved or conical shape, according to basic geometry, but also allegorical, metaphorical, or comparative speech, according to classical rhetoric. In turn, just as both novels are parabolic in their obsessive attention to metaphor and intertextual similarity (and in the latter’s ostensible political lessons about the dangers of militarization), this essay can also be considered parabolic in its comparative focus on exemplary cases. The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers the following definitions:

PARABOLIC: 1 a. Of or relating to parabola (PARABOLA n. 2) or simile; figurative, metaphorical. *Now rare.* b. Of, relating to, or of the nature of a parable or parables; expressed by a parable; allegorical. 2a. Geom. Of the form of or resembling a parabola; having a shape whose cross-section is a parabola; relating to the parabola. b. Astron. Of space: Euclidean. *Now chiefly in parabolic space n.* at Special uses. *Rare.*

PARABLE: 1. An allegorical or metaphorical saying or narrative; an allegory, a fable, an apologue; a comparison, a similitude. Also: a proverb, a maxim; an enigmatic or mystical saying (now arch.). 2 a. A (usually realistic) story or narrative told to convey a moral or spiritual lesson or insight; esp. one told by Jesus in the Gospels. (Now the usual sense.) b. Chiefly Irish English. Something that may be pointed to as an example or illustration, an exemplary case; a model, a lesson.
and locations are represented less by descriptions of the visible, perceivable, and manifest than by ascriptions of the invisible, suspect, and latent. As Joyce’s modernist revision of the ancient, post-war epic *The Odyssey* is set in 1904, the year he left Dublin for Zürich, it surely represents at least in part a nostalgic sense of the author’s peaceful home city in contrast to his experience as an expatriate on the increasingly war-torn Continent. However, his novel is obviously not a historical allegory, and nor does it represent the same kind of parabolic crisis-time that Pynchon depicts in his wartime novel. The shape of *Ulysses* is routine and temporal rather than dramatic or historical: according to Joyce’s schemata, the overall setting is not any particular place or period but rather the scene of “World Space” in a transcendent hour called simply “Time.” Although *Gravity’s Rainbow* also concludes in a kind of “world space,” represented in the end by the appearance of the Tarot card known as “The World,” its episodic spatial narrative does not take place temporally so much as historically (and so if one had to compare it to ancient epics, it might appear more akin to *The Iliad* than *The Odyssey*). Indeed, the story shifts about in time so much that it is often unclear when or where it is taking place, and so the only thing that does remain clear is the overarching historical significance of World War II.

Thus above all, the main distinction between these two puzzling, twentieth-century classics is that *Ulysses* is a *spatiotemporal*, mock epic novel that emplots ordinary, sequential experience, while *Gravity’s Rainbow* is a *spatiohistorical*, mock modernist novel that emplots extraordinary, parallel situations. According to the Graecocentric understanding of temporality that Frank Kermode reconsiders in his critique of apocalyptic history, we might say that former dwells more in *chronos*, the duration of passing time, whereas the latter persists in *kairos*, the imminence (or, in this case, *immanence*) of crisis-time. For Kermode, *kairos* is constitutive of Christian conceptions of time as well as Karl Jaspers’ existential concept of the despairing “boundary-situation” [*Grenzsituation*]. However, given that the word often implied opportunity rather than despair in ancient Greek thought, it may be compared just as aptly to Benjamin’s concept of the “now-time” [*Jetztzeit*], depending on whether it is oriented toward the grave, ponderous and tragic or the light, active and comic. In any case, while the *chronos* of *Ulysses* is oriented above all toward a kind of ironic beauty, the *kairos* of *Gravity’s Rainbow* remains suspended in a tragicomic inter-zone of absurdist paranoia that suggests more of an ironic sublime. It also represents a larger, postwar literary turn from experiential, phenomenological or existential temporalism to critical, deconstructive, or cynical historiography (or what Linda Hutcheon has called “historiographic metafiction”). Given that Pynchon’s *V.* takes after *Ulysses* more closely in its episodic narrative style, I would argue that it is the cynical historiography of *Gravity’s Rainbow* that distinguishes its parabolic style above all. While *Ulysses* ends with a transcendent “yes,” *Gravity’s Rainbow* leaves little room for any kind of affirmation, transcendence, or closure.

And so if Pynchon’s plots and characters sometimes feel excessively abstract, flat, external, or “Stencilized” (to borrow a term from *V.*), it is a result of too much history rather than too little, as his ironic paranoia arguably more in keeping with Fredric Jameson’s Marxist critique of postmodern amnesia than it is subject to it. James Wood’s more

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mainstream critique of “hysterical realism” might be worth mentioning again here, except that the novel’s comedy is not so much hysterical as it is cynical, operating according to a cheeky “hermeneutics of suspicion” far more than emotional over-sensitivity. In this way, the unhappy consciousness of Stephen Dedalus’s famous quip, “History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake,” obviously persists in what could be called the postmodern poetics of cynical historiography. However, while the figure of Daedalus could still stand for the persistence of the ascensional imagination after World War I, it is Icarus who became iconic of the fall into World War II, making it impossible to view science, enlightenment and the idea of “Homo Faber” without also confronting the deadly violence of National Socialism and the Faustian light of the atom bomb.

Pynchon’s spatial metaphor of “centrifugal History” is key here, and should help us wind this chapter up (or, for that matter, down). In many ways it is comparable to Yeats’ trope of the “widening gyre” in his post-WWI poem “The Second Coming,” which should remind us that the apocalyptic image of kairós-time was by no means unique to postmodernism. However, while Yeats envisions the apocalyptic second coming as transcendental and imminent (“surely some revelation is at hand”), for Pynchon the apocalypse is imminent (in other words, “apocalypse now”). Furthermore, although Pynchon is no less mystical, he does not point to a singular western tradition but rather a plurality of “scattered” symbolic systems, including tarot cards, mandalas, astrology, and the Kabbalah as well as Christian ritual and eschatology. More significantly, he ultimately envisions them acting as a potentially post-secular counterforce to centrifugal History rather than its technological engine:

As some secrets were given to the Gypsies to preserve against centrifugal History, and some to the Kabbalists, the Templars, the Rosicrucians, so have this Secret of the Fearful Assembly, and others, found their ways inside the weatherless spaces of this or that Ethnic Joke. There is also the story about Tyrone Slothrop, who was sent into the Zone to be present at his own

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451 See Peter Sloterdijk’s Critique of Cynical Reason for his compelling, unorthodox theory that modern cynicism has become resigned to “enlightened false consciousness” instead of engaging with the more active and critical “cheekiness” [Frechheit] apparent in ancient kynicism (esp. pp. 293-94 for a brief consideration of the concept of cynical historiography). See Paul Ricoeur’s Freud and Philosophy (pp. 32-36) for a discussion of what he calls “the hermeneutics of suspicion,” especially as he sees it exemplified in the influential work of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud.

452 The well-known adage, “History is written by the victors,” is perhaps the most exemplary maxim of cynical historiography (even if Winston Churchill meant it in all seriousness), for it calls our attention to a truth while also resigning us to the false presumption of its inevitability.

453 W.H. Auden’s 1938 poem “Le musée des beaux arts” can be read as an early example of this poetic turn, as it focuses on Brueghel’s famous painting “The Fall of Icarus” and was written just after Auden returned from reporting on the Sino-Japanese war to live temporarily in Europe, where the tragic descent into World War II was already underway. The term “Homo Faber” is of course central to Max Frisch’s 1957 novel of that name (which happens to revolve around an airplane crash), and is featured throughout Hannah Arendt’s study The Human Condition (especially under the title “The Defeat of Homo Faber”), which was published a year later and was positively reviewed by Auden.

454 For an attempt to argue for “post-secularism” in the works of Pynchon and other American novelists in comparison to recent developments in European philosophy, see John McClure, Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007)
assembly – perhaps, heavily paranoid voices have whispered, his time’s assembly – and there ought to be a punch line to it, but there isn’t. The plan went wrong. He is being broken down instead, and scattered.\textsuperscript{455}

Arguably the most mystified and “scattered” figure in Pynchon’s post-war universe is that of V., appearing to be personified as an exotic lesbian secret agent in the novel of that name, and reified as the phallic V-2 rocket in \textit{Gravity’s Rainbow}. The two are linked in that Stencil’s obsession with V. in the former is overtly historicized as having begun the same year that most of the action comes to a close in the latter. “Stencil became curious in 1945,” he explains,\textsuperscript{456} referring to himself as usual in the third person in a manner akin to Henry Adams, whose essay “The Dynamo and the Virgin” was an obvious resource for Pynchon’s understanding of the mystification of technology.\textsuperscript{457} Why Stencil became curious, and what V. ultimately stands for, remains unclear and unresolved in the novel; as he himself appears to admit, “not the war, nor the socialist tide which brought us Soviet Russia,” nor V. herself are much more than symptoms of “something monstrous” that was growing larger and spiraling out of control over the course of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{458} And as the narrator ultimately acknowledges, “V. by this time was a remarkably scattered concept.”\textsuperscript{459} This scattered concept returns in \textit{Gravity’s Rainbow} not only in the form of the V-2, but also in the proleptic scene set in Los Angeles at the end of the novel, in which the character Richard M. Zhluub is mentioned as having “a habit of throwing his arm up into an inverted ‘peace sign,’” just as Richard M. Nixon did at that very spot in 1971.\textsuperscript{460} Thus the “V.” is ultimately revealed as a symbol less of victory than of the inversion of peace – that is, the persistence of militarization and warfare throughout the brief post-war period and into what came to be called the Cold War.

And so \textit{Gravity’s Rainbow} should be recognized as an ironic critique of apocalyptic, centrifugal history rather than an example of it. Framed by the opening epigraph from Wernher von Braun and the closing image of Richard Nixon’s “V”, it satirizes the presumed “victory” of the so-called American Century as well as its triumphalist fantasy of historical immanence, which Francis Fukuyama would notoriously define after the end of the Cold

\textsuperscript{455} Pynchon, \textit{Gravity’s Rainbow}, 737
\textsuperscript{456} Pynchon, \textit{V.}, 415
\textsuperscript{457} Pynchon alludes to Adams directly when he first introduces Stencil in \textit{V.}: “Herbert Stencil, like small children at a certain stage and Henry Adams in the Education, as well as assorted autocrats since time out of mind, always referred to himself in the third person.” Pynchon, \textit{V.}, 51. For more on this connection, see Cooley, Ronald W. “The Hothouse or the Street: Imperialism and Narrative in Thomas Pynchon’s \textit{V}.” Adams wrote his autobiographical book \textit{The Education of Henry Adams} after visiting the 1900 Paris exposition, which he discussed in the twenty-fifth chapter, “The Dynamo in the Virgin.” “To Adams,” he wrote of his experience, “the dynamo became a symbol of infinity. As he grew accustomed to the great gallery of machines, he began to feel the forty-foot dynamos as a moral force, such as the early Christians felt the Cross….its value lay chiefly in its occult mechanism.” Later on, he attempts to explain why the emerging technological faith in the dynamo, which had yet to take off in America, had followed from the Catholic cult of the Virgin: “Symbol or energy, the Virgin had acted as the greatest force the Western world ever felt, and had drawn man’s activities to herself more strongly than any other power, natural or supernatural, had ever done.” Adams, Henry. “The Dynamo and the Virgin” in \textit{The Education of Henry Adams} (New York: Dover, 2002), 292
\textsuperscript{458} Pynchon, \textit{V.}, 416
\textsuperscript{459} Pynchon, \textit{V.}, 418
\textsuperscript{460} Pynchon, \textit{Gravity’s Rainbow}, 755
War as the “End of History.” Early in Pynchon’s novel, Pointsman wonders, “Will Postwar be nothing but ‘events,’ newly created one moment to the next? No links? Is it the end of history?” For Pynchon, as for each of the postwar American novelists that we have considered here, the answer is a caustic “No.”

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461 Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, 56
Chapter Four
THE VERTIGO OF VERTICALITY:
Alfred Hitchcock and the Displacement of Terror

The word “terror” is invoked in the trailer for Alfred Hitchcock’s 1958 film *Vertigo* in order to explain its title, which producers worried would be too esoteric or confusing for the public at large. Beginning with a close-up of a red, leather-bound dictionary, which is promptly opened, the shot zooms in to reveal a definition more sensationalistic than accurate: “VERTIGO: a feeling of dizziness…a swimming in the head…figuratively a state in which all things seem to be engulfed in a whirlpool of terror.” After these words are articulated in the voice-over, the image of the page starts to spin around until it eventually dissolves into the colorful spiraling patterns from Saul Bass’s fantastic title sequence for the film (except that here they turn clockwise rather than counterclockwise).

This teaser turns our attention to the idea of vertigo around which the film revolves without actually explaining its provenance or importance. Similarly, much of the film’s criticism either avoids or mystifies its historical significance by focusing instead on its intriguing figures and disturbing points-of-view. And so we are left to our own devices to figure out how its protagonist’s vertigo is symptomatic of his personal fear, guilt, trauma and melancholia as well as the time and place around him: the San Francisco Bay Area sometime after World War II.

According to Donald Spoto’s early study of Hitchcock, both the spatial form and the plot of *Vertigo* represent familiar if not even universal themes:
The geometry of the film is itself vertiginous: set in America’s most vertical city, the manner of the film entirely threatens verticality itself. The condition, after all, is described as the fear of falling and the desire to fall; the longing for risk and the fear of loss; the desire to die and the terror of death; the fear of losing balance and control and the concomitant desire to swoon, to pass away, to lose life itself in the pursuit of love.\textsuperscript{462}

While this broadly humanist interpretation still seems compelling, along with critical, psychoanalytic readings of fetishism, scopophilia, and phallocentrism in the film,\textsuperscript{463} there is much more to be said about its emphasis on space and time, not to mention its post-war history. The question thus remains to be asked: why did Hitchcock’s film redefine “vertigo” in terms of \textit{terror}, and effectively reorient it from panoramic spinning, whirling or dizziness (which it had generally signified since the 16\textsuperscript{th} century)\textsuperscript{464} to fear of heights and depths — in a word, from the horizontal to the vertical?

Some important clues to this mystery can be gleaned from the pages of \textit{Good Housekeeping}, where in 1949 Hitchcock published a strange essay called “The Enjoyment of Fear.” Ten years after he had emigrated from London to Los Angeles, and four years after World War II had come to an end, Hitchcock attempted to define his career-long interest in terror and suspense in relation to the German air raids over England:

Fear in the cinema is my special field, and I have, perhaps dogmatically, but I think with good cause, split cinematic fear into two broad categories — terror and suspense. The difference is comparable to the difference between a buzz bomb and the V-2.

\textsuperscript{462} Spoto, Donald. \textit{The Art of Alfred Hitchcock} (New York: Anchor, 1991), 277

\textsuperscript{463} Beginning with Laura Mulvey’s monumental essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” and continuing on with Teresa De Lauretis’ \textit{Alice Doesn’t}, Tania Modleski’s \textit{The Women Who Knew Too Much}, and the essays in Slavoj Zizek’s edited collection, \textit{Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)}, among others.

\textsuperscript{464} The \textit{Oxford English Dictionary} offers the following definition and quotations:


1. Path. A disordered condition in which the person affected has a sensation of whirling, either of external objects or of himself, and tends to lose equilibrium and consciousness; swimming in the head; giddiness, dizziness.

1528 PAYNELL Salerne’s Regim. Cijib, The heed ache called vertigo: whiche maketh a man to wene that the world turneth. 1558 W. BULLEIN Govt. Health Av, Apoplexia and Vertigo will neuer fro the[e] starte, Untill the vitall blode be killed in the harte. 1619 E. BERT Hawkes & Hawking III. v. 85 A disease.of some called Vertego, it is a swimming of the braine. 1681 tr. Willis’ Rem. Med. Wks. Vocab., Vertigo. 1766 BEATTIE Let. in Life \& Writ. (1806) I. 93 Have I not headachs, like Pope? vertigo, like Swift? 1799 Med. Jrnl. II. 119 The most common effects observed from full doses, are vertigo, pain, or throbbing of the forehead. 1803 Ibid. X. 396 The general symptoms were pain across the forehead with vertigo. 1840 THACKERAY Paris Sk. bk. (1872) 185 He felt as if attacked by vertigo, and his thoughts thirled in his brain. 1875 RICHARDSON Dis. Mod. Life 72 In those who have irregular circulation through the brain, the tendency to giddiness and vertigo is more easily developed.
To anyone who has experienced attacks by both bombs, the distinction will be clear. The buzz bomb made a noise like an outboard motor, and its chugging in the air above served as notice of its impending arrival. When the motor stopped, the bomb was beginning its descent and would shortly explode. The moments between the time the motor was first heard and the final explosion were moments of suspense. The V-2, on the other hand, was noiseless until the moment of its explosion. Anyone who heard a V-2 explode, and lived, had experienced terror.\textsuperscript{465}

This provocative example should help us rethink Hitchcock’s post-war thrillers in a number of ways. He later returned to it again in an interview for \textit{Cinema} magazine about his other Bay Area film, \textit{The Birds} (1963). Discussing a harrowing scene in which a crowd is being attacked from above, Hitchcock remarked: “Now the helplessness of the people is no different in that sequence than people in an air raid with nowhere to go. Now, that’s where the idea came from. I’ve been in raids...in London and the bombs are falling, and the guns are going like hell all over the place. You don’t know where to go. Where can you go?”\textsuperscript{466}

If the terror \textit{Vertigo} was temporarily relieved by Cary Grant’s lighthearted derring-do in \textit{North By Northwest} (1959), then \textit{The Birds} reminds us that there may be no escape from its persistence. Although it is often interpreted as a Cold War allegory of nuclear attack, a more plausible reading is that, like the marauding airplane in \textit{North By Northwest}, the militant avians represent the threat of air war in general. This is especially evident in the original story by Daphne Du Maurier, which was in fact first published in the October 1952 issue of \textit{Good Housekeeping}, the same magazine in which Hitchcock published “The Enjoyment of Fear” three years before. Revolving around a disabled World War II veteran living on the coast of England, Du Maurier’s story was no doubt related to the experiences of her distinguished husband, Frederick Browning, who, already a veteran of World War I, ultimately served as the British Commander of the First Airborne Division in World War II. The story refers to the air raids directly, as when the protagonist Nat thinks to himself that the attacking birds appeared “like air raids in the war,” or later, when he switches on the radio and we read: “The usual programmes had been abandoned. This only happened at exceptional times. Elections, and such. He tried to remember if it had happened in the war, during the heavy raids on London.”\textsuperscript{467}

\textsuperscript{465} Hitchcock, Alfred. “The Enjoyment of Fear” in \textit{Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected Writings and Interviews} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 118


The birds in Hitchcock’s film recall the suspense of the buzz bomb and the terror of the V-2 in that they both warn of their presence with a whirring or buzzing sound and also strike suddenly with unexpected shrieks of fury. Their aggressive violence is defined as part of a larger “war” in the key scene in which Melanie Daniels (Tippi Hedren) seeks refuge in a Bolinas coffee shop. When she tells the locals that a school has been attacked, it takes some time before they start to worry, and even then the scene remains almost comic, as when the
drunk Irishman at the corner of the bar quotes apocalyptic lines from the Bible and repeatedly jokes, “It’s the end of the world!” Most skeptical is the elderly English lady Mrs. Bundy (Ethel Griffies), who dismisses the story as naïve paranoia due to her curious knowledge of ornithology. When the cook comes out of the kitchen to inquire what’s wrong, she replies with an ironic chuckle: “We’re fighting a war, Sam!” Only later do these suspicions become overwhelmed by the reality of the situation: as the birds descend upon a gas station across the street like a squadron of bombardi and then fly away as it goes up in a blaze of fire, it becomes clear that the ironic analogies to war were in fact terrifyingly accurate. In turn, when we ultimately see the devastation from the perspective of the birds themselves, the film alludes to the military technology that actually helped develop the so-called “birds-eye view” in the first place. For as Paul Virilio and Anthony Vidler have argued, the photographic view from above was to a large extent pioneered by World War I pilots on reconnaissance flights before it was adopted by art photographers, filmmakers and city planners.468

There are of course no scenes of warfare in Vertigo, but war nonetheless informs what, in Freudian parlance, we could call the hidden or latent content of the film. To begin with, its star, Jimmy Stewart, was well-known at the time of the film’s release as the first major American actor to serve as a soldier abroad. Coming from a family of military men and already a practiced pilot, he made a special effort to enlist in the Army Air Corps after he was drafted, and ultimately became a successful bombardier and squadron commander in numerous attacks over Germany.469 Curiously, although Stewart’s public tour of duty was heroic, most of the characters he ended up playing after the war were privately troubled, damaged, or emasculated men, exemplified perhaps best by the handicapped, hysterical voyeur “Jeff” Jeffries in Hitchcock’s Rear Window (1954).

What connects Vertigo to World War II more directly, however, is the fact that it was based on a French crime novel that takes place in Paris both in the years leading up to the German occupation and after the fall of the Vichy regime. Unlike Hitchcock’s Scottie, who is diagnosed with “acute melancholia, together with a guilt complex” simply because he witnessed a fellow officer fall to his death, the French character on which he was based associates his vertigo with the “national disaster” of wartime France as a whole. Delving deeper into this back-story should help us better understand how Hitchcock reflected on Europe during World War II in order to develop his unique brand of terror and suspense for American audiences during the Cold War.


469 Stewart remained in the Air Force Reserves after the war, and was eventually promoted to Brigadier General in 1959, one year after Vertigo came out. The year before, he starred in the role of famous pilot Charles Lindbergh in Billy Wilder’s The Spirit of St. Louis.
French Twist

According to François Truffaut in his famous interview with Hitchcock on the set of _The Birds_, the French crime writers Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac were pursued by both Hitchcock and Henri-Georges Clouzot for the rights to their novel _Celle qui n'était plus_, and because Clouzot eventually won out with his celebrated film _Les Diaboliques_ (1955), they went on to write their 1954 novel _D'entre les morts_ (From Among the Dead) with the idea of a Hitchcock adaptation in mind. Paramount studio records confirm that an agent read the original French text as early as November 1954 and purchased it in April 1955, after which Hitchcock read two English-language scripts before setting out to develop his own. Although the final 1957 version was co-written with Samuel Taylor and Alec Coppel, according to Taylor, the final product was Hitchcock’s “from first frame to last.”

Hitchcock rejected Truffaut’s claim that _D'entre les morts_ was written explicitly for him, however, and interviews with the writers themselves corroborate this. According to Narcejac, although they were indeed interested in Hitchcock’s work at the time, the idea for the original story actually derived from an experience he had in which, while watching a newsreel in a Paris movie theater, he thought he recognized a friend he had lost during the war. “After the war,” he explained in an interview with Dan Aulier, “there were many displaced people and families. It was common to have ‘lost’ a friend. I began to think about the possibilities of recognizing someone like this. Maybe someone who was thought dead …and this is where _D'entre les Morts_ began to take shape.”

Questions of displacement and recognition are of course also central for Hitchcock's film, and, as we shall see, they may be further explained in relation to Gilles Deleuze’s argument about the centrality of World War II in determining the course of twentieth-century film history.

The protagonist of _D'entre les morts_ is a Frenchman named Roger Flavières who is asked by his old lawschool friend, Paul Gévigne, to follow his wife, a mysterious woman who, like the character played by Kim Novak in Hitchcock’s film, bears the name Madeleine. In both the novel and the film, she is simultaneously a victim and a perpetrator of the return of the repressed, and both her name and her role as a figure of involuntary memory recall the famous cookie in Marcel Proust’s _In Search of Lost Time [À la recherche du temps perdu]._ In fact, according to Richard Goodkin’s communication with Samuel Taylor, the screenwriter had read Proust years before working on the film, and decided on the surname Elster (which means “magpie” in German) as an homage to Elstir, the painter who introduces Proust’s

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472 Spoto, 268
473 Aulier, 28
474 For a predominantly Deleuzian approach to Hitchcock’s oeuvre, see Tom Cohen’s *Hitchcock’s Cryptonomies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), which is comprised of two volumes, *Secret Agents and War Machines*.
475 The magpie is typically known as a thieving bird, which is fitting for the image of Elster as a criminal profiteer. Donald Spoto mistranslates this as “mockingbird” in his reading of bird figures in the film: “On Madeleine’s gray suit is pinned a gold mockingbird, for which the German word is *Elster*. Not only is this apt for Hitchcock’s lifelong theme of the birds of chaos, but of course this Madeleine is a ‘mocking bird,’ one woman imitating another.” In Spoto, 287
narrator to his elusive object of desire, Albertine. In the novel, Madeleine appears haunted by her great-grandmother, the French woman Pauline Lagerlac, while according to Hitchcock’s colonial Californian twist, her name is Carlotta Valdes. As we eventually learn, however, the ghost story is in fact an elaborate fiction created by Madeleine’s husband in his sinister plot to kill her. In the novel, Flavières is hired by Gévigne because of his previous experience as a police officer (and, as it turns out, because of his fear of heights), just like Scottie in the film. Yet unlike Scottie, Flavière’s nagging guilt is due not only to his trauma of witnessing a fellow officer die in the line of duty, but also because he used his “vertige” as a medical excuse to be excused from military service. In turn, while Gavin Elster curiously “disappeared during the war” before taking on the shipbuilding business that belonged to his wife’s family in San Francisco, Gévigne’s business is building ships for the French war effort against Nazi Germany. On the second page of the novel, he admits that this was the reason why he was also excused from the army: “My factory at Le Havre has been working at full blast ever since the mobilization, which is, incidentally, the reason why I haven’t been called up.” A little later, Flavières begins to wonder whether Gévigne may in fact be a war profiteer – “This war was going to make the fellow a millionaire” – before stopping himself short out of a recognition of his own sense of wartime guilt: “Flavières banished the thought, ashamed of it. Was he not himself profiting from the absence of others who had been called up? It is true he had failed to pass a medical, but was that really a valid excuse?” In the second half of the novel, however, Gévigne is said to have been gunned down by German aircraft, and so, unlike Elster in the film, it appears that he doesn’t actually profit from his crime in the end.

Sights, sounds and stories of the war pervade the novel in the form of soldiers in the streets, airplanes flying overhead, and newspaper articles that repeatedly distract Flavières from his job of pursuing Madeleine. Early on, for instance, we read:

In the street Flavières found himself in the six o’clock rush. He bought an evening paper. Two enemy planes had been brought down near the Luxembourg frontier. The leading article proved conclusively that the Germans were losing the war. They were blockaded; they were contained. The General Staff had envisaged every possibility and were only waiting for the enemy to embark on a last despairing venture.

Flavières yawned and stuffed the paper into his pocket. He couldn’t take any further interest in this war. What mattered was Madeleine.

Later, when Madeleine asks Flavières to join her on a long drive into the country, he inquires: “Why should you leave Paris? There’s little risk of air raids, and this time the Germans won’t even reach the Marne.” He keeps pressing her on her reasons for leaving until she finally replies, “Don’t let’s talk about that any more.”

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478 Boileau, Pierre and Narcejac, Thomas. Vertigo, 11
479 Boileau, Pierre and Narcejac, Thomas. Vertigo, 32
480 Boileau, Pierre and Narcejac, Thomas. Vertigo, 71
And let’s forget all about the war for a moment.” After strolling through the wilderness they eventually reach a church with a tall tower, which she climbs up. Then, just as in the film, she apparently plummets to her death. Unable to reach the top due to his fear of heights, Flavières sees the sight from a window on the spiral staircase, where he is left alone to weep in grief and terror. He later makes it back to Paris, and after meeting with Gévigne to discuss the tragedy, he takes leave of the capital for Orléans and becomes increasingly swept up in the news of the war, in which he “saw the image of his own disaster.” With German military attacks on the rise, residents begin to flee Orléans for the South, and after the train station at Saint-Pierre-des-Corps is bombed in an air raid, Flavières decides to leave for Toulouse. As we learn later in the second part of the novel, he eventually settles as far away as Dakar during the Vichy regime, and only returns to Paris four years later, after the war has come to an end. In a long passage that brings the first part to a close, Flavières portrays himself as a refugee both from the war as well as from his lost love, so much so that he “made little distinction now between the national disaster and his own,” ultimately recognizing the dead Madeleine as a symbol of France as a whole:

It was known now that German armour was advancing on Arras, and that the fate of the country was in the balance. Every day more cars drove through the town, looking for the bridge and the road to the South. And people stood in the streets silently staring at them, their hearts empty. They were more and more dirty, more and more ramshackle. With a shamefaced curiosity, people would question the fugitives. In all this, Flavières saw the image of his own disaster….He went to a mass at the Cathedral in honour of Joan of Arc, and prayed for France and Madeleine at the same time. He made little distinction now between the national disaster and his own. France was Madeleine lying crushed and bleeding at the foot of a church tower. 481

This overt national allegory is of course lost in the transposition of the novel’s story from wartime Paris to late-1950s San Francisco. But is it entirely? My argument here is that the fear of violence, destruction and loss so apparent in D’entre les morts, as well as in Hitchcock’s recollection of wartime London, played a significant but largely hidden role in the development of Vertigo. By transposing the story of the novel from Paris and its environs to the San Francisco Bay Area, Hitchcock effectively displaced the European terror of World War II onto American culture during the Cold War, and in turn revealed that the idyllic, rolling topography of the northern California coastline was in fact pacific only in name.

The Metropolis and Depth Psychology

According Sigmund Freud, displacement \([Ver}schiebung]\) is a defensive psychic process by which the energy or affect associated with a particular threat, danger or fear is transferred elsewhere, usually through some form of distortion, censorship or repression. Along with condensation, it is the primary mode of dream-formation, as Freud first defines it in *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

A transference and displacement of psychical intensities occurs in the process of dream-formation, and it is as a result of these that the difference between the text of the dream-content and that of the dream-thoughts comes about. The process which we are here presuming is nothing less than the essential portion of the dream-work; and it deserves to be described as ‘dream-displacement’. The consequence of the displacement is that the dream-content no longer resembles the core of the dream-thoughts and that the dream gives no more than a distortion of the dream-wish which exists in the unconscious. But we are already familiar with dream-distortion. We traced it back to the censorship which is exercised by one psychical agency in the mind over another. Dream-displacement is one of the chief methods by which that distortion is achieved. *Is fecit cui profuit* [“He did the deed who profited from it”]. 482

In referring to this idea, I am suggesting that Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* not only transferred the plot of Boileau and Narcejac’s novel from Paris San Francisco, but that it also transferred some of the energy, atmosphere and significance of the novel’s wartime terror to an apparently more manageable location.

Although this historical background was entirely cut from the film, there are a few clues that point to it in subtle ways. For instance, it remains a mystery why Gavin Elster “disappeared during the war,” as Scottie mentions to Midge in passing, or why the elderly historian Pop Liebel has a vaguely French accent and an unexplained past. More curious is Midge’s reference to wartime engineering at the beginning of the film, when she explains that the “revolutionary uplift” brassiere that she is working on was designed by an “aircraft engineer down the peninsula,” no doubt an allusion to the cantilevered underwire bra that aviator, engineer, and filmmaker Howard Hughes invented for Jane Russell to wear in his 1941 film *The Outlaw*. 483 More important than these details, however, is the way in which the novel’s wartime setting also informs the mood, themes and motifs in Hitchcock’s film, especially as they are overtly framed in psychoanalytic terms of castration anxiety, melancholia, and fetishistic fantasy.


483 Interestingly, Barbara Bel Geddes, the actress who played Midge in the film, was the daughter of Norman Bel Geddes, another industrial designer specializing in aerodynamics as well as the more horizontalist development of the American highway system.
(1960), and Marnie (1964). Although he was presumably never aware of Georg Simmel’s 1903 essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” a number of compelling connections can also be made between Freud’s depth psychology and Simmel’s metropolitan sociology, as Walter Benjamin recognized early on in his writings on modern urban life, which should in turn help us better understand the connections between psychic topography and urban space in Vertigo. Both Hitchcock’s film and the novel on which it was based represent their protagonists as being driven not only by libidinal desire and the return of the repressed, but also by the money economy of the built environment, which Simmel argues plays an especially dominant role in the psychologies of city dwellers. While the character of Paul Gévigne in the novel is shown to be profiting from the French military-industrial complex through his business building ships for the war, in the film, Gavin Elster is revealed to be profiting from the shipbuilding business he took over thanks to his marriage to Madeleine. In turn, both develop their elaborate murder plots in order to keep their money to themselves, and the women they hire to play the part of the wife agree to do so because of the financial incentive involved. Indeed, as Freud noted in his definition of displacement, *ipsa cui profuit*—“He did the deed who profited from it.”

By contrast, Flavières in the novel and Scottie in the film initially agree to follow the mysterious Madeleine as a favor with no apparent financial gain; Flavières, who admits a personal interest in psychology, even goes as far as to say, “It’s the case I’m interested in, not the money. I’ve already the feeling your wife and I have something in common.”

When these characters eventually see how beautiful she is, their libidinal desires drive them all the more. However, like many protagonists of modern crime fiction and Film Noir, both also suffer from what Simmel calls the “blasé attitude,” that typical syndrome of modern metropolitan life that acts as a defense mechanism to maintain the sovereignty of the individual against the barrage of urban overstimulation. Flavière’s wartime cynicism and melancholia is an extreme case, however, as he is also afflicted by the fear that the city around him will actually be destroyed. For this lost soul, the only true meaning to be found in the midst of such an extreme state of emergency is in the realm of the erotic:

> He felt incapable of getting his mind out of the rut, incapable of the least mental effort.
> Picking up his hat, he went out. His client would come back another day – or not at all! It didn’t matter in the slightest. What did? Paris might at any moment be reduced to a heap of rubble. Besides, if the war went on, he would probably feel obliged to join up in some capacity or other. The future was in any case a blank. Nothing had any real meaning except the present, the spring leaves in the sunshine – and love.

Although such themes and motifs in the French novel seem well-translated into the visual language of Hitchcock’s film, it is less clear how the displaced spatial anxiety of metropolitan terror manifests itself on the screen, and how this might resonate with American audiences who never experienced air raids during World War II. While European

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484 Boileau, Pierre and Narcejac, Thomas. *Vertigo*, 16
and Asian cities suffered from massive damage, destruction, and displacement as a result of the war, the United States emerged not only victorious but relatively unscathed. That said, Cold War fears of nuclear attack were already well-established in American public culture at the time of the film’s release, as artist Johan Grimonprez shows in his essayistic documentary films Looking For Alfred (2005) and Double Take (2009). In turn, as Edward Dimendberg argues in his book Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity, consciousness of the nuclear threat from above informed the contemporary American turn to decentralization in urban planning as well new trends in American popular cinema, the crime genre in particular. 486 As filmmakers and urban critics alike were increasingly recognizing, the centripetal and centrifugal forces of displacement caused by the post-war urbanization and suburbanization were producing new forms of spatial anxiety and fear that had not only national but global significance. 487

The Centripetal and the Centrifugal

With the twentieth-century ascendance of the United States to the world stage, American urbanization was based to a large extent on what Frank Lloyd Wright called “the vertigo of verticality” in his last book, The Living City. Published one year before his death, and the same year that Hitchcock’s film came out, Wright’s book addressed new Cold War concerns about the dangers of nuclear attack alongside his already established ideas of organic architecture and democratic decentralization, which he developed in his 1930 Kahn lectures at Princeton and his books The Disappearing City (1932), When Democracy Builds (1945), and The Future of Architecture (1953). Hitchcock had already become impressed by Wright’s work by this time, and even tried to hire him to design the Vandamm House in North By Northwest, the film he made immediately after Vertigo. The connection was never made, however, perhaps because the architect’s costs were too high, or because he was too busy designing the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, which opened to the public in 1959 with its own famously centrifugal form.

North By Northwest may be described as centrifugal in that its mystery narrative spirals outward from the metropolitan center in which it begins, but in contrast to the tragic melancholia of Vertigo, it is a ultimately a comic action film that works to redeem or vindicate the human potential to resist the force of gravity. Like Vertigo, it opens with an inventive credit sequence designed by Saul Bass, but instead of anxious circular patterns, we see glitzy, vertically-kinetic titles that appear along a grid; this in turn gradually dissolves into the glass-walled façade of a Manhattan skyscraper, which is later revealed to be the United Nations building. While Jimmy Stewart’s Scottie is debilitated by acrophobia and forced to

487 Dimendberg references two particularly remarkable quotations as evidence for his argument; the first is from nuclear physicist Edward Teller, along with two economists, in 1948: “In an atomic war, congested cities would become death traps.” The other is from Paul Windels, president of the New York Regional Plan in 1950: “Decentralization has been termed insurance against war. But insurance only makes good for losses after damage has occurred. Decentralization is much more than insurance. It is a powerful deterrent to the outbreak of war.” In Dimendberg, 248-9.
wear a back-supporting corset at the beginning of Vertigo, we are first introduced to Cary Grant’s Roger Thornhill as he exits the elevator of a tall office building and confidently pushes his way through a revolving door into a busy midtown street. A bold ad man with a talent for upward mobility, Thornhill eventually ends up dodging an attacking airplane in an open cornfield and rock-climbing around the edges of Mount Rushmore. The mistaken-identity plot that displaces him “north by northwest” across the flat plains of the American countryside, and further and further from the heights of New York, also works to separate him from his overbearing mother. In this way, the metropolis for him is very much a “mother-city,” as the word’s Greek etymology implies, and his adventure across the American landscape comes to represent both the flight from Oedipal entrapment and the triumph of phallic heroism. As Hitchcock quipped in one interview: “There are no symbols in North By Northwest. Oh yes! One. The last shot, the train entering the tunnel after the love-scene between Grant and Eva-Marie Saint. It’s a phallic symbol. But don’t tell anyone.”

The film also represents its hero’s triumph over modernist architecture. Beginning with the midtown Manhattan skyscraper where Thornhill works, it eventually turns to the United Nations Building, which was designed by a team of International-Style architects that included Le Corbusier, arguably the twentieth century’s greatest advocate for verticality. It ends, by contrast, at the horizontal, split-level house that hovers precipitously over the cliffs of Mount Rushmore, where Thornhill has tracked down the villain, Philipp Vandamm, to his lair. After Hitchcock failed to commission Frank Lloyd Wright to design the Vandamm House, the task ultimately went to set designers led by Robert Boyle, who built a model of it in an MGM studio and processed it later to appear onsite (just as they did with the busts of the American presidents from the historic monument). Boyle in fact imitated the layering of Wright's Fallingwater house in Pennsylvania, because, in his words, “I had to have something that Cary Grant could climb up.” The film thus obviously pays its respects to Wright’s horizontal aesthetic as a challenging alternative to the architectural verticality of the New York skyline, although it remains an open question whether Vandamm House represents the villain’s sinister nature or simply his personal taste for anti-urban modernist style.

Wright’s passionate defense of organic architecture and “natural horizontality” against the market forces of urban verticality was above all based on his self-proclaimed attempt to develop a harmony between nature and civilization. In The Living City, he argued that, as a result of the rampant verticalization of modern architecture, the centripetal and centrifugal forces of urban centralization are spinning out of control, so that cities are becoming literally over-shadowed by tall buildings instead of being open to fresh air and

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489 Although Hitchcock may never have known it, Gutzon Borglum, the designer and artist of the national monument, had in fact already asked Wright to design a house for him, as well. In a letter to Wright dated October 7, 1935, Borglum wrote, “I am planning another house but you must build it for me. I have told the press so.” Wright, upon visiting Borglum in 1935, wrote in an essay that “human nature, let us hope eventually nature’s higher nature, found its hand for this [mountain carving] in Gutzon Borglum’s master hand.” Quoted in Public Broadcasting Station. American Experience: Mount Rushmore, Mark Zwonitzer, writer and producer (2001), available online at: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/rushmore/peoplevents/e_hitchcock.html

natural light. In opposition to the stratification and conformity that have resulted from market-driven planning, Wright called for an organic “Architecture of Democracy” that would be based on “law for man rather than law over man”\(^{491}\) – a “natural horizontality”\(^{492}\) that would overcome what he called “the vertigo of verticality.”\(^{493}\)

\[\text{The Vandamm House: cantilevered horizontal design based on Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater}\]

Wright’s goal was the survival of the city, albeit a decentralized, horizontal one, and for him this meant rethinking many of the urban forms that had been established in Europe and then, during the war, destroyed.\(^{494}\) As he explains in The Living City, the new European opportunity for urban reconstruction after its period of wartime destruction might ultimately mean that the post-War American boom is ultimately only short-lived. According to this argument, the emergent American Century, established definitively by the invention and use of the Atom Bomb, is ultimately destined for decline, or, in his words, “V for Victory may look more like V for Vanquished”:

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\(^{491}\) Wright, Frank Lloyd. *The Living City* (New York: Mentor/Horizon Press, 1958), 28
\(^{492}\) Wright, *The Living City*, 22
\(^{493}\) Wright, *The Living City*, 58
\(^{494}\) Wright’s theoretical opposition to verticality apparently did not apply to underground or subterranean construction, especially concerning defense from overhead attack. In describing his plan for his ideal Broadacre City, he writes: “At proper points along or under railways or highways safe, spacious underground refuge should be constructed for the various kinds of storage uses in peacetime. These might afford protection under attacks from the air; making such attack unprofitable.” (147)
Probably our many big city survivals (yes, feudal – plus gadgetry) will escape destruction from inside if not overhead only to find their originals (European cities devastated by us) replanned and built more nearly as a modern city should be than ours. We have had no benefit from the devastating bomb ourselves except to make the bomb, market it, and drop it ourselves over “on the other side.” So we are likely, as things are, to find ourselves far outmoded by any standard of comparison when the smoke of destruction clears away in the light of reconstruction and V for Victory may look more like V for Vanquished.495

Although the metropolis originally developed as a form of civic centralization, according to Wright, it has increasingly turned its “centripetal force” vertically, so that just as rents are rising according to market forces, buildings are growing taller to house higher-paying inhabitants who live in such fear of the ground level that they are willing to submit to “pig-piling”:

Long ago – having done all it could do for humanity – the centralization we call the big city became a centripetal force grown beyond our control; agitated by rent to continually additional, vicarious powers. Thus the system is steadily increasing in man his animal instincts, his fear of being turned out of the hole into which he has been accustomed to crawl in again each evening to crawl out again next morning. Natural horizontality – true line of human freedom on earth – is going, or gone. The citizen condemns himself to perhaps natural but most unbecoming (and now unprofitable to him) pig-piling. What he aspires to is a sterile urban verticality, actually unnatural to him because he is upended, suspended and traffic-jammed by this verticality due to his own mad excess. He is calling this evidence of fixability instead of flexibility – success. It is only conformity.496

For Wright, the centripetal forces of centralization not only lead to conformist stability, however; they also produce a counterforce that he calls centrifugal, which either leads to broad dispersal or to eventual explosion: “Centralization now proves to be something that, used to wind space up tighter and tighter, smaller and higher, is like some centripetal device revolving at increasing speed until – terrible, beyond control – it turns centrifugal, ending all by dispersal or explosion.”497

Hitchcock’s Vertigo never depicts any images of urban explosion, either literally or figuratively, but it is haunted by centripetal and centrifugal forms of dispersal, both in the San Francisco Bay Area and in Scottie’s traumatic memories, fetishistic desires, and

495 Wright, The Living City, 247-8. It should be noted that these words were written only one year after the Soviet launch of Sputnik, the first sign that the United States might be falling behind in the Cold War. This event not only set off the space race, but, arguably, the end of verticalism tout court, as the new recognition of gravitational orbits and forces increasingly worked to resignify the extra-terrestrial universe in terms of “outer space” as opposed to the heavens “above.”
496 Wright, The Living City, 22
497 Wright, The Living City, 33-34
phallocentric fantasies. The film obviously also depicts numerous vertical figures, such as the tenement building and ladder in the opening scene, the tall moving cranes in the view from Gavin Elster’s office window, the towering Golden Gate Bridge seen from various vistas throughout the film, Coit Tower in the view from Scottie’s living room window, the tall sequoia trees outside the city, and of course the church tower at San Juan Bautista (not to mention the city’s naturally rolling hills, where most of the characters’ “wandering” takes place by car). The forces of desire that revolve around these figures are in turn visually coded through centripetal and centrifugal motifs and camerawork. They are represented first and perhaps best by the animated credit sequence designed by Saul Bass, in which spinning geometric spirals and other circular patterns focus our attention on both their centripetal, inward-pulling centers as well as their centrifugal extensions.

The Centrifugal, Counter-Clockwise Spiral

Immediately following the credit sequence, the film opens with a close-up on a horizontal bar before quickly tracking out to reveal that it is the top wrung of a ladder, which reaches up to the rooftop of a building encircled by a misty halo of the city at night. After a hand grabs the bar a dark figure follows immediately after, climbs to the top of the roof, and runs across it, followed by several police officers in quick pursuit. The picturesque landscape of the San Francisco Bay Area extends across the background as the camera pans across the rooftop to frame the criminal suspect in his flight from the law. Scottie then appears running across the rooftop, and when he attempts to jump to another part of the building, he stumbles, falls, and grabs hold of the edge to keep from plummeting all the way to the ground. The camera frames him from above through a high-angle, medium close-up shot as he dangles from the edge; it then cuts to the famous point-of-view shot of his vertiginous downward gaze. This zoom into the backdrop of the concrete abyss below, accompanied by a simultaneous tracking shot that pulls away from the scene, produces the illusion of
simultaneous suspension and freefall in an apparently vertical depth of field, which signifies the terrifying oscillation between the death drive and the will to live.

In this way, just as the credit sequence establishes the motifs of the centripetal and centrifugal, the opening scene emphasizes the vertical and horizontal. These are in turn associated with two of the most prominent themes of the film: vision (an extreme close-up shot of an eye, an urban panorama illuminated by streetlights at dusk, a vertiginous view from above) and gender (an invasive close up on a woman’s face, a birds-eye-view of a man’s face as he dangles precipitously from the rooftop). The third theme, which develops later in the film and brings the other two together, is of course the haunting power of memory, and again it is already in the opening that we see it emerge as the driving force behind Scottie’s many involuntary returns.

**Displacement, Recognition, and the Time-Image**

Why are spatial forms so important for the representation of memory in *Vertigo*? Although Freud never refers to the centripetal and centrifugal in developing his vertical topography of the psyche (and nor does Gilles Deleuze in his more horizontal philosophy of immanence), Henri Bergson did in fact refer to these cyclical “currents,” as he called them, in his book *Matter and Memory*. Toward the end of the chapter “Of the Recognition of Images,” Bergson argues that automatic, habitual or virtual memory is a centripetal current that goes from the object of perception to the more passive or receptive subject, whereas “pure memory” is a centrifugal current that goes from the active subject to the object of perception. From here, Bergson ultimately defines attentive recognition in terms of the latter: “Whatever the number and the nature of the intervening processes, we do not go from perception to the idea, but from the idea to the perception; the essential process of recognition is not centripetal, but centrifugal.”

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498 That said, Deleuze did claim in his 1968 book on Spinoza that “Immanence is the very vertigo of philosophy,” and then reiterated this again almost twenty-five years later in *What is Philosophy?*: “Spinoza is the vertigo of immanence from which so many philosophers try in vain to escape.” Deleuze, Gilles, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 180 and *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 48. For more on the trope of vertigo in Deleuzian philosophy, Kerslake, Christian. *Immanence and the Vertigo of Philosophy: From Kant to Deleuze* (Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

499 Bergson, Henri. *Matter and Memory* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 130. Before arriving at this conclusive statement, Bergson develops his enigmatic argument as follows: “For, on the one hand, complete perception is only defined and distinguished by its coalescence with a memory-image, which we send forth to meet it. Only thus is attention secured, and without attention there is but a passive juxtaposing of sensations, accompanied by a mechanical reaction. But, as we shall show later, the memory-image itself, if it remained pure memory, would be ineffectual. Virtual, this memory can only become actual by means of the perception which attracts it. Powerless, it borrows life and strength from the present sensation in which it is materialized. Does not this amount to saying that distinct perception is brought about by two opposite currents, of which the one, centripetal, comes from the external object, and the other, centrifugal, has for its point of departure that which we term ‘pure memory’? The first, alone, would only give a passive perception with the mechanical reactions which accompany it. The second, left to itself, tends to give a recollection that is actualized – more and more actual as the current becomes more marked. Together, these two currents make up, at their point of confluence, the perception that is distinct and recognized.” (127-28, emphasis mine).
represents the present and the circular interior represents the ideas of the past that continually inform it, as well as his more curious conceptions of contractive translation and expansive rotation:

Memory, laden with the whole of the past, responds to the appeal of the present state by two simultaneous movements, one of translation, by which it moves in its entirety to meet experience, thus contracting more or less, though without diving, with a view to action; the other of rotation upon itself, by which it turns toward the situation of the moment, presenting to it that side of itself which may prove to be the most useful.500

According to Deleuze's commentary on Bergson in Cinema 2: The Time-Image, these two kinds of recognition may also be defined in terms of the horizontal and vertical.501 Here, Deleuze argues that automatic or habitual recognition works through the extension of “horizontal movement” from one object to another by way of association along “one and the same plane.” By contrast, attentive recognition works by continually returning to the object of perception so that the object remains the same even though it passes through “different planes.” While automatic recognition produces only a sensory-motor image of the thing, attentive recognition produces a “pure,” descriptive image.502 While these distinctions may appear confusing, Deleuze nonetheless maintains that, “In any case, the Bergsonian revolution is clear: We do not move from the present to the past, from perception to recollection, but from the past to the present, from recollection to perception.”503 In turn, as we shall see, this spatial theory of memory also provides the foundation for Deleuze's argument about the centrality of World War II in marking the shift from the “movement-image” to the “time-image” in the history of twentieth-century cinema.

The most prominent figure of attentive recognition in Vertigo is of course the bun in Madeleine’s hair, which is referred to in the novel as a distinctly French chignon. Although it could be characterized as both a centripetal movement-image and a centrifugal time-image, depending on where it appears in the film, it appears to represent the latter above all. For although Scottie takes note of it in an automatic or habitual sense when he sees Madeleine for the first time at Ernie’s restaurant, he recognizes it in a more attentive or “pure” sense when he discovers a surprisingly similar hairstyle in the portrait of Carlotta Valdes at the Palace of the Legion of Honor. While the first recognition scene is represented by a close-up

500 Bergson, Matter and Memory, 168-9.
501 Despite Deleuze's resistance to depth psychology, his interpretation of Bergson here bears remarkable resemblance to Jacques Lacan’s definition of displacement in terms of the opposition between verticality and horizontality. Bringing together Freudian psychoanalysis and Roman Jakobson’s structuralist linguistics, Lacan argues that displacement is related to metonymy along a horizontal axis, whereas condensation, which is enabled by it, is related to metaphor along a vertical axis. While metonymic chains of desire are made of horizontal relations in which signifiers are combined, linked, or associated by contiguity, according to his theory, metaphorical substitutions are made of vertical relations in which a signifier in one signifying chain may be substituted through its similarity with a signifier in another chain. See especially Ecrits: A Selection (New York: Norton, 1977), 164.
502 See Deleuze, Gilles. Cinema 2: The Time-Image (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 44
on Madeleine’s face, the second involves an active zoom to an extreme close-up on the bun in the portrait, immediately followed by another zoom to an extreme close-up on the bun in Madeleine’s hair as she sits on a bench staring at the portrait. Each of Scottie’s uncanny recognition scenes go from idea to perception: his recognition of the connection between Madeleine and Carlotta, his later recognition of Judy as the ghostly likeness of Madeleine, and even his recognition of Midge in the guise of Carlotta in her ironic self-portrait. While the image of the bun recurs in each case, it passes through different levels of association, and so, in Bergsonian terms, it may be defined as attentive or centrifugal rather than automatic or centripetal. In turn, from a more psychoanalytic perspective, the bun increasingly becomes an object of fetishistic fantasy with each repetition, and eventually becomes the final motivating trope in Scottie’s necrophilic desire to transform Judy back into Madeleine in the second half of the film. We are thus ultimately led to believe that Scottie has displaced the melancholic introjection of his lost love, the imaginary Madeleine, onto his newfound object of desire, the real Judy, through a form of fetishistic aggression that flows directly from the centrifugal current of his symbolic memory.

Carlotta’s Bun

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504 This scene is imitated to remarkable effect in *Un Conte de Noël* (Arnaud Desplechin, 2006 2008), in which Mathieu Amalric follows Catherine Deneuve into a museum while the theme music from *Vertigo* is playing in the soundtrack; after she sits down on a bench to gaze at a portrait on the wall, the camera zooms in to her neck, around which she is wearing a necklace bearing a Star of David.
We may also discern a remarkable representation of rotational memory in the scene in which Judy and Scottie are kiss at the Empire Hotel after she satisfies his final demand to put the twisty chignon back in her hair (although this is to use the term loosely, as it does not match Bergson’s concept of rotation as opposed to translation and in fact seems to oscillate between the centripetal and the centrifugal). Throughout this revolutionary, 360-degree shot, the lovers’ embrace remains the central axis or pivot of the cinematic turn that keeps our eyes fixed while the camera circles around them. While the turning itself seems smooth, it is at the same time continually paused, deferred and counter-balanced, as the actors were in fact standing on a rotating platform while the camera simultaneously tracked and panned around them. This effect makes the shot appear curiously extended in duration, as if defying the chronological passage of time and approaching a kind of uncanny immanence. It is in turn further complicated by the eventual appearance of a centrifugal countermovement, which pulls the characters out of the present moment and back into an uncanny, recollected past. As they begin to kiss and the camera commences its rotation around them, the background gradually fades to black and then dissolves to a processed shot of the horse stable by the church tower where Madeleine fell to her death. Meanwhile, Bernard Herrmann’s theme music (based on Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*) shifts from a slow, romantic tone to a more quick and anxious one that sounds reminiscent of the kind of carnivalesque music typically heard on merry-go-rounds where mannequin horses are usually found.

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505 The “organic” also stands out in this scene, as Linda Williams shows with intense scrutiny in her paper “Kisses and Itches in Hitch’s *Vertigo,*” originally presented for the “Fiftieth Anniversary of *Vertigo*” panel at the 2008 MLA conference in San Francisco (San Francisco, Dec. 28, 2008).

506 See the voice-over commentary of the set designers on the Universal Legacy Series DVD, produced in 2008, for further explanation of how they orchestrated this shot.
Centripetal Embrace: In the Moment

Centrifugal Embrace: Haunted By Memory
Whose recollected image is this? Looking carefully, we can see that while Judy remains focused on Scottie throughout the embrace, he pulls away and glances from side to side with a distracted, quizzical expression on his face as the music and backdrop change around him. It is only after he turns back to her and resumes the kiss, reentering the enveloping intensity of the moment, that the image of the room gradually returns, the uncanny memory disappears, the characters stop spinning around, and the camera finally completes its rotation and fades to black. Finally leaving the past behind and focusing entirely on the moment as the uncanny, centrifugal time-image reverts back to the automatic, centripetal movement-image, Scottie is able to temporarily free himself from both memory and expectation, trauma and dread – and thus, ultimately, his persistent terror.

The production of suspense and terror in the film may also be defined in terms of the subordination of active, spatial extension to attentive, temporal intensity. We see this first with the centrifugal credit sequence at the very beginning, and then again later in the famous point-of-view shot of Scottie’s vertigo, in which the camera extends into the depth of field by simultaneously zooming and tracking while Scottie himself remains suspended in space and time. Later it is the church tower at San Juan Bautista that becomes the central site of vertiginous terror, and indeed, the first scene at the tower suggests that the potential or desire for panoramic vision may just as easily turn on castration anxiety as panoptic phallocentrism. By the end of the film, however, Scottie finally conquers his debilitating fear by forcing Judy to confess her deceptive masquerade and confront her guilt at the traumatic scene of her crime. Compelled to repeat his repressed memory of failing to climb the spiral staircase in order to eventually overcome it, as well as the trauma that caused his vertigo in the first place, his ascent to the top of the tower brings the film full circle. At this point, he is finally able to reach the top and remain fully erect even while witnessing a third and final fall. Having regained his power, at least for the moment, he appears freed not only from the centrifugal force of melancholic memory that had haunted him from the start, but also from the centripetal force of desire that drove him throughout the film. This recognition scene remains a tragic one, however, as the once noble but now pathetic hero has managed to conquer his fear of heights and regain his “power and freedom” only by falling violently out of love. In contrast to the death-defying scenes of heroic rescue at the end of North By Northwest, in which the potential for salvation represents the comic survival of desire, here there is no one left to save or be saved and no one to desire or be desired. The past and the future no longer seem to matter after the seductive fear of death has been lost, and so all we are left to face is the terror of the present instead.

Understanding time in Vertigo according to Bergson’s theory of duration, which Deleuze describes as an immanent confluence of memory, consciousness and freedom, should also help us further recognize how the film relates back to the wartime history with which we began. Although Deleuze avoids simple historicism, his philosophy of cinema is organized according to a broadly historical argument that World War II was pivotal in determining the shift from the active and automatic movement-image, which dominated the films of the first half of the twentieth century, to the more attentive and reflective time-image, which came to increasingly replace it in the 1930s. Hitchcock played a particularly important role in this shift, according to Deleuze, because he “completed the circuit of the movement-image and brought to its logical perfection what could be called classical
cinema.” Deleuze explains further: “Hitchcock’s cinema appeared to us the very culmination of the movement-image...because it goes beyond the action-image towards the ‘mental relations’ which frame it and constitute its linkage, but at the same time returns to the image in accordance with ‘natural relations’ which make up a framework.” In turn, it is because of this temporal intensification of space that the Hitchcockian “character has become a kind of viewer,” as Deleuze explains: “He records rather than reacts. He is prey to a vision, pursued by it or pursuing it, rather than engaged in an action.” And so it is for this reason that Deleuze refers to *Vertigo* in particular listing the post-war films that exemplify the time-image best.

Chris Marker has also emphasized the dominance of time over space in *Vertigo*, both in his films *La Jetée* (1962) and *Sans Soleil* (1983) and in his essay “A free replay (notes on *Vertigo*),” which was first published in French in 1994. He argues the point most succinctly: “The vertigo the film deals with isn’t to do with space and falling; it is a clear, understandable and spectacular metaphor for yet another kind of vertigo, much more difficult to represent – the vertigo of time.” This claim echoes statements made in *Sans Soleil*, and follows soon after his precise descriptions of the three scenes in which the phrase “power and freedom” is repeated in Hitchcock’s film. Although he doesn’t say much about this repetition besides the fact that it is beyond coincidence, we may recognize that these words are invoked in each instance in order to describe a past that has been lost.

While oscillating between nostalgia and melancholia, *La Jetée* also establishes a direct connection between the time-image in general and wartime in particular. Marker’s experimental science fiction film effectively reverses the Bergonian philosophy of time on which Deleuze relies, however, as it imagines that the future can in fact change the past. Produced only four years after *Vertigo* came out, *La Jetée* is composed of still photographs that are cut together in such a way that the interstitial void between the frames is brought to the fore and possibility of mobility is continually deferred. Vertical transcendence, as represented by the recurring image of the airport jetty, is in turn represented as forever imminent or on the horizon rather but never immanent or present.

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507 Deleuze, Cinema 2: The Time-Image, 34
508 Deleuze, Gilles. Cinema 2: The Time-Image (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 163-64
509 Deleuze, Gilles. Cinema 2: The Time-Image, 3
510 Deleuze, Cinema 2: The Time-Image, 82
511 Marker, Chris. “A free replay (notes on *Vertigo*)” in Projects 4 ½, ed. by John Boorman and Walter Donohue (Faber & Faber, 1995). Originally published in Positif 400 (June 1994). English version available online at: http://www.chrismarker.org/a-free-replay-notes-on-vertigo/. Yi-Fu Tuan also appeals to this trope of “the vertigo of time” in his essay “Nature,” where he writes: “Vertigo of space is common enough. Stand at the edge of a cliff and one can suddenly feel dizzy, about to fall – about to be drawn into the yawning space. Do people ever experience vetigo of time? Very rarely, I should think, because time, unlike space, is not something that one can see. Its vastness has to be imagined.” In Dear Colleague: Common and Uncommon Observations (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 2
512 Note that Deleuze defines the “void” in terms of “vertigo” as follows: “The whole thus merges with what Blanchot calls the force of ‘dispersal of the Outside,’ or the ‘vertigo of spacing’; that void which is no longer a motor-part of the image, but is the radical calling into question of the image (just as there is a silence which is no longer the motor-part or the breathing-space of discourse but is its radical calling into question).” Deleuze, Cinema 2: The Time-Image, 180.
Revolving around a protagonist who has survived the nuclear devastation of the “third world war” and traveled back in time to the “hot pre-war Sunday” of the 1960s, *La Jetée* refers to *Vertigo* directly in the memorable scene in which he takes his newfound object of desire to the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. Just like the scene in Hitchcock’s film in which Madeleine and Scottie visit the sequoia forest in the outskirts of San Francisco, Marker’s characters eventually come upon the cut-down cross-section of a giant tree turned on its side. While both films focus on the grain of the wood in order to represent time as an organic series of concentric rings, Marker takes Hitchcock’s scene to another level of uncanny temporality by turning its gothic story of ghostly haunting into a science fiction tale of futuristic time travel. In *Sans Soleil*, the narrator mentions this “quotation” of Hitchcock directly when telling us of Sandor Krasna’s pilgrimage to the San Francisco Bay Area in order to re-trace the original locations of *Vertigo*: “He remembered another film in which this passage was quoted. The sequoia was the one in the Jardin des plantes in Paris, and the hand pointed to a place outside the tree, outside of time.”

513 For Marker’s own analytical discussion of *Vertigo*, see his essay “A free replay (notes on *Vertigo*)” in *Projects 4 1/2*, ed. by John Boorman and Walter Donohue (Faber & Faber, 1995), available online at the following weblink: http://www.chrismarker.org/a-free-replay-notes-on-vertigo. The artist Victor Burgin also considers this scene in his 1993 essay film, *Venice*, which focuses mainly on an essayistic comparison between Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* and Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project.*
“Here is where I was born, and there I died.”

In *Vertigo*, Hitchcock allows us to see the grain of the wood in close up, where we read: “THE WHITE RINGS INDICATE THE WIDTH OF THE TREE WHEN THE VARIOUS EVENTS TOOK PLACE....” From here the camera tilts down to the center, labeled “909 AD,” before returning back up, past various events in world history, to the outer edge: “1930: TREE CUT DOWN.” Madeleine then points her black-gloved finger at the grain of the wood and, apparently assuming the voice of Carlotta Valdes, says, “Here is where I was born,” and, moving her figure further to the edge, adds, “and there I died. It was only a moment for you. You took no notice.” Just as this *Sequoia sempervirens* is now fossilized, and thus no longer “always living,” Madeleine now appears as a strange relic of the past in the ghostly guise of Carlotta. By contrast, in *La Jetée*, it is the male protagonist who appeals to the tree to explain his ghostly existence rather than the female object of desire, and instead of pointing to the rings in the grain of the wood, he gestures to a point in the air beside the tree in order to explain that he is actually from the future rather than the past.

Whether haunted by the return of repressed terror, or pointing ahead to a terror that is yet to come, both Hitchcock and Marker focus on the figure of the tree trunk as an indexical representation of a finite period of historical time that is simultaneously centrifugal, since the rings extend outward, and vertical, since the tree obviously grew upward in height while the trunk expanded outward in width. As a fossilized record of lost time, this image exemplifies how the vertigo of verticality that came to dominate post-war cinema revolved around time at least as much as space. In turn, as a symbol of the inevitability of death as well as a historical record of life, it is ultimately much like film itself.
Afterword

ON THE HORIZON

It is only from a vertical position that the horizon can become visible. And so, in concluding this study of the vicissitudes of modernist verticality over the long twentieth century, I want to end with a more theoretical exploration into the idea of the horizontal. In particular, I want to consider the extent to which horizontal tropes of immanence, equality and globalization – in contrast to resurgent forms of verticalism – have gained currency especially in the post-Cold War age of digital telecommunication, hypertextual networks, and American “hyperpower.”

My hypothesis is that the vertical turn of the first half of the twentieth century has increasingly given way to a new discourse of horizontalism, which now promises popular forms of equality and community that vary widely from libertarian radicalism to market-driven conformism. I believe that these ideas, whether progressive or exploitative, have become especially important for the relatively dispersed populations of both suburban enclaves and atomized urbanites, and that the explosion of online commerce, social networking and “crowdsourcing” in the early twenty-first century has served at least in part as a means of managing both the insecurities, fears, and traumas of 9/11 as well as the violent resurgence of American imperial aggression abroad.

Immanence, Equality and Globalization

Just as freedom is often represented through spatial metaphors of vertical transcendence and mobility, as we have come to recognize in the previous chapters, equality is often represented in terms of horizontal immanence and uniformity. Several tropes may easily come to mind here, such as the level playing field, even plane, or common ground, and the movement toward such equality is often represented through liquid metaphors of transference and circulation, such as current, stream, or flow. These metaphors have become particularly commonplace in the First World rhetoric of globalization.

One of the most prominent examples of this rhetoric is Thomas Friedman’s bestselling book The World Is Flat (and its more environmentalist sequel, Hot, Flat and...
Crowded). Yet although Friedman attempts to explain how his titular thesis came to him like an epiphany after researching business enterprises around the world, he doesn’t mention that the trope had already been coined much earlier by Theodore Levitt, along with the term “globalization” itself, in a 1983 article for the Harvard Business Review entitled “The Globalization of Markets.” Here, Levitt’s argument was mainly one of technological determinism: “a powerful force drives the world toward a converging commonality, and that force is technology.” In arguing that technology has enabled the globalization of capitalist markets and that “cosmopolitanism is no longer the monopoly of the intellectual and leisure classes,” Levitt concludes with the sub-heading “The Earth is Flat,” where he asserts: “The earth is round, but for most purposes it’s sensible to treat it as flat. Space is curved, but not much for everyday life here on earth.”

Despite the popularization of this thesis by Friedman and others, the vision of a horizontal world has also been well-disputed by scholars, including the Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz, who has critiqued what he calls Friedman’s “franchise” with the counter-claim that “Not only is the world not flat: in many ways it has been getting less flat.” Nonetheless, comparable ideas of horizontalization have also become apparent in more rigorous and critical scholarship on global flows of capital, culture, and people, especially work informed by Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts of “derritorialization” and “immanence” and Manuel Castells’ theory of the “space of flows.” Important examples include the writings of Saskia Sassen on “horizontal networks” and Arjun Appadurai on “global flows,” and the largely Deleuzian approaches of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their books Empire and Multitude. In turn, new assertions of horizontality are by no means exclusive to academia, but have also become prevalent in popular culture, from grassroots social uprisings to the Hollywood movie industry. For instance, the progressive Argentinian social movement that emerged from the workers’ rebellion of December 2001 has come to be called horizontalidad, because, according to Marina Sitrin, “many movement participants began speaking of their relationships as horizontal in order to define the new forms of decision-making.” As Sitrin explains, the name “horizontalidad implies democratic communication on a level plane and involves—or at least strives towards—non-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian creation rather than reaction. It is a break with vertical ways of

organizing and relating. *Horizontalidad* is a living word that reflects an ever-changing experience.”  

By contrast, as Kristin Whissel has shown in her recent work on digital special effects in popular cinema, representations of the “horizontal multitude” have also appeared in such big-budget, profitable films as *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (Peter Jackson, 2002) and *Troy* (Wolfgang Petersen, 2004). In turn, Whissel argues that a somewhat more individualistic “new verticality” has also emerged in blockbusters like *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997) and *The Matrix* (The Wachowski Brothers, 1999). As she has demonstrated, widescreen images of computer-generated crowds and swarms do not necessarily produce a sense of vertigo in their spatialization of time, but instead tend to represent either an apocalyptic end or a new beginning, and the digitally-enhanced, gravity-defying heroes are not actually overturning the difference between the horizontal and the vertical, but are instead reinforcing familiar ideologies of upward mobility.

In their blockbuster academic book *Empire*, Hardt and Negri define their idea of “the multitude” in relation to the concept of the “plane of immanence,” which, following Deleuze and Guattari, they trace back to an early modern discourse culminating in the thought of Benedict de Spinoza:

> By the time we arrive at Spinoza, in fact, the horizon of immanence and the horizon of the democratic political order coincide completely. The plane of immanence is the one on which the powers of singularity are realized and the one on which the truth of the new humanity is determined historically, technically, and politically. For this very fact, because there cannot be any external mediation, the singular is presented as the multitude.

According to their argument, the potentiality or “horizon” of both immanence and the multitude were first defined by the rise of Renaissance humanism and during the Copernican Revolution. In turn, they argue, the shift from feudalism to “capitalist sovereignty” has brought about a more “immanent exercise of discipline” in which there is a “flattening of these vertical instances toward the horizontality of the circuits of control.” While this intellectual history is intriguing, the underlying assumption that the philosophy of democratic politics coincided with the philosophy of immanence is not so convincing, especially

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Elsewhere, Hardt and Negri suggest that, despite the apparent horizontality of resistance movements today, they are nonetheless linked vertically to new imperial centers: “If these points were to constitute something like a new cycle of struggles, it would be a cycle defined not by the communicative extension of the struggles but rather by their singular emergence, by the intensity that characterizes them one by one. In short, this new phase is defined by the fact that these struggles do not link horizontally, but each one leaps vertically, directly to the virtual center of Empire” (58).
525 Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 330
considering that ideas of immanence played little role in the American or French Revolutions, two of the earliest struggles to bring about democratic political orders in practice. Along these lines, Ernesto Laclau has developed an important critique of Hardt and Negri’s theory in his essay, “Can Immanence Explain Social Struggles?” As he observes, “The full realization of the multitude’s immanence,” as they define it, “would be the elimination of all transcendence. This can only be accepted, of course, if the postulate of the homogeneity and unity of the multitude as an historical agent is not put into question.”

And yet, as Laclau rightfully suggests, it is exactly this assumption of homogeneity and unity that should indeed be questioned, as no such multitude has ever or could ever exist. For this reason, the utopian idea of a unified, horizontal plane of immanence is not adequate for an attempt to account for what Laclau calls “vertical struggles,” whether of social classes or minorities or of isolated individuals: “…We are in the terrain of what Gramsci called ‘war of position.’ But this political game is strictly incompatible with the notion of a plurality of unconnected vertical struggles, all targeting—through some unspecified mechanism—an assumed virtual center of the Empire.”

The over-valorization of immanence also has the potential to occlude the more progressive, future-oriented temporality represented by its homonym, imminence. Although easily confused, the two terms of course carry very different meanings: immanence implies presence, involvement and interdependence, while imminence implies nearness, possibility, and expectation. The difference between the two may be further illuminated with reference to the metaphorical concept of the horizon (from the Greek horizein “to bound” or “delimit”), for just as there can be no perception of a horizon line without a vertical vantage point, there can be no sense of imminence without the expectation of transcendence. Hans-Robert Jauss has conceptualized this distinction in terms of the “horizon of experience” and the “horizon of expectation.” I would argue that Deleuze and Guattari have become some of the greatest advocates for the former, as they define their central concept of the “plane of immanence” [plan d’immanence] in relation to what they call the “absolute horizon” rather than the “relative horizon.”

According to Jauss’s reception, which Reinhardt Kosseleck has since refashioned with regard to the philosophy of history, the Erwartungshizont refers to a limited or bounded set of expectations according to which a readers’ perspective is formed. In focusing on expectation rather than experience, Jauss suggests that ideas of the future may play as least as much a role in shaping our perceptions as ideas of the past, and that the recognition of living in a “new time” of modernity [Neuzeit] occurs above all when “expectations have distanced themselves from all previous experience.” Modernity is not without its limitations, however, for as Jauss’s theory implies, expectations are always bounded by a horizon, and such lines of limitation are not only unavoidable but are in fact also productive.

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527 Laclau, “Can Immanence Explain Social Struggles?”, 9
529 Kosseleck, Reinhardt. Futures Past, 276
This is an important point in the phenomenological tradition beginning with Edmund Husserl, although even earlier, Nietzsche suggested something similar in his famous essay *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History For Life.* “This is a universal law: a living thing can be healthy, strong and fruitful only when bounded by a horizon; if it is incapable of drawing a horizon around itself, and at the same time too self-centred to enclose its own view within that of another, it will pine away slowly or hasten to its timely end.”

**Uneven Development and Horizontal Flow**

The historical concept of uneven development is one of the greatest contributions of Marxist critiques of urbanization and globalization. It may be traced back to *Capital,* in which Marx argued that a major contradiction of “the general law of capitalist accumulation” is that it produces both concentrations of wealth and capital for the ruling classes as well as poverty and oppression for the working classes. While Lenin attempted to expand upon this idea, it was ultimately Trotsky who devised and codified the precise term “uneven and combined development” itself, which he explained as follows:

...the entire history of mankind is governed by the law of uneven development. Capitalism finds various sections of mankind at different stages of development, each with its profound internal contradictions. The extreme diversity in the levels attained, and the extraordinary unevenness in the rate of development of the different sections of mankind during the various epochs, serve as the starting point of capitalism.

In contrast to this generally structuralist approach, discussions of capital flows have attempted to account for the ways in which monetary currency is not quite so fixed and static, but is in fact always to some degree mobile and dynamic – if not even volatile. And it is along these lines that anthropologists, sociologists and cultural critics have also begun to conceive of culture in terms of flow, and thus less as a thing or substance or even a practice or performance that can be located in a single place or time, and more as a mobile process of circulation and exchange across space and time.

Unlike the economic metaphor of capital flow and the psychological metaphor of stream-of-consciousness (which was first defined by William James before it came to be used

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533 Marx, Karl. *Capital* (Chapter 27, paragraph 15)


as a literary term), the metaphor of *cultural flow* appears to be a relatively recent invention in academic discourse. Following after the cybernetic theory of informational flow pioneered by Norbert Wiener in the late 1940s, arguably one of the first appeals to the concept of flow in cultural studies appeared in Raymond Williams’ 1974 study *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. Here, Williams not only developed the concept of flow to define “the endless stream of images” in television programming, he also argued for this “mobile concept” as an specific alternative to the more “static concept of ‘distribution.’” Having become influential in the field of television studies, this idea of televisual flow is also no doubt an important model for the metaphorical concept of “streaming” audio and video on the Internet today.

When the anthropologist Ulf Hannerz turned to the metaphor of cultural flow in his 1992 book *Culture and Complexity*, he expressed some hesitation with what still seemed like a new and untested idea, and explained his definition more in terms of externalization and display than mobility and circulation:

> The cultural flow thus consists of the externalization of meaning which individuals produce through arrangements of overt forms, and the interpretation which individuals make of such displays – those of others as well as their own. Perhaps the imagery of flows is a little treacherous, to the extent that it suggests unimpeded transportation, rather than the infinite and problematic occurrence of transformation between internal and external loci. Yet I find the flow metaphor useful – for one thing, because it captures one of the many paradoxes of culture.

By contrast, Manuel Castells was much less hesitant in embracing the metaphor of cultural flow in his book *The Informational City*, which was first published a few years earlier in 1989. Defining his theory of “the space of flows” in terms of “the dialectics of centralization and decentralization,” his vision of a “web of generally horizontal exchanges” eventually evolved into his theory of “network society” in the first volume of his study *The Information Age*, which has proved remarkably durable for discourses of technology, new media, and globalization to this day.

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536 Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 77
538 Castells, Manuel. *The Informational City*, 138
539 While far more expansive, the actor-network theory of Bruno Latour is also surprisingly absolutist in its horizontalism. Explicitly rejecting the significance of vertical difference, Latour calls instead for a completely “flat” model. Writing under the title “How to Keep the Social Flat” in his book *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), Latour’s critique of “totalizing panoramas” seems to throw out the baby with the bathwater by making sweeping claims against all “three-dimensional” understandings of oppositional interaction: “It is inside their narrow boundaries that we get our commonsensical idea that interactions occur in a ‘wider’ context; that there is a ‘up’ and a ‘down’; that there is a ‘local’ nested inside a ‘global’; and that there might be a Zeitgeist the spirit of which has yet to be devised.” (189). Latour first explains his insistence on “flat” reasoning in the book’s introduction: “Although social scientists are proud of having added volume to flat interactions, it turns out that they have gone too fast. By taking for granted this third dimension – even if it’s to criticize its existence – they have withdrawn from
Since then, and especially after Arjun Appadurai published his watershed essay “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy” in 1996, ideas of flow and circulation have become commonplace in discourses of cultural globalization.\textsuperscript{540} That said, the metaphor of flow is of course by no means new; in linguistics, it has be explained by what Michael Reddy, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have called “the conduit metaphor,”\textsuperscript{541} and in genealogical terms, it can be traced back to ancient discourses of circulation in the body.\textsuperscript{542} For instance, as one recent article from \textit{The Journal of Finance} points out, western ideas of monetary circulation derive at least in part from ancient ideas of the “body politic,” and the specific association of money with blood can be traced back to Christian thought during the Middle Ages:

St. Paul's frequent comparison of the Church to the human body was the perfect complement to the 'blood of the Savior' idea which was central to Medieval Christianity. A century after Oresme we find the trope refined to the basic form it was to have for the next three hundred years. At the 1485 meeting of the French Estates General a cahier was presented which declared: ‘Money is in the body politic what blood is in the human body.”\textsuperscript{543}

One particular problem with such metaphors of circulation and flow for understanding the dynamics of globalization is that they naturalize economic, social and cultural forces as organic, spontaneous, or automatic instead of recognizing their construction. For unlike the circulation of blood in the body, socio-economic development is not natural but labored over, planned or orchestrated, whether from the top down or from the bottom up. Although the metaphor of flow may still apply to both “trickle-down” and “grass-roots” movements, it often occludes the recognition of stratification, hierarchy, and other historical inequalities of uneven development that tend to be figured in vertical terms. For this reason I believe it is crucial that we develop a more historical and multi-layered understanding of mobility and difference in the world at large.


\textsuperscript{542} And of course much the same can be sense for the spatial metaphor of the “horizon,” as Didier Maleuvre has recently shown in his enigmatic book of intellectual history, \textit{The Horizon: A History of Our Infinite Longing} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

The Problem of a Multi-Layered Dialectic

The very concept of history itself may be interpreted as implying multiple layers or stories of existence rather than a single, flat plane. Both English and Romance languages derive the term from the Latin *historia*, which contains the spatial metaphor of *storia*, meaning a succession of stages or series of layers, as in the architectural stories of a building. Furthermore, as Reinhardt Koselleck has observed, this spatial metaphor is also apparent in the German language, in which the word for history (*Geschichte*) also includes the word for layer (*Schicht*); “To ask which layer (*Schicht*) of experience is called upon each time, it may be helpful to bear in mind the spatial metaphors contained in our word for ‘history’ (*Geschichte*).”

Koselleck elaborates on this elsewhere by recognizing that this idea of structural layering may in turn produce a hierarchical sense of vertical stratification: “The presence in the term *Geschichte* of the spatial and partially static sense of ‘stratification’ (*Schichtung*) is emphasized by the coupling ‘structural history.’”

In case there is any doubt, I should emphasize here again that my aim in attending to this stratified, vertical sense of history is not to reinforce it, but rather to recognize and critique the ways in which it has become established. It is in turn for this reason that, instead of assuming the existence of a single plane of flows in the history of globalization, I believe it is important to develop a more dialectical understanding of multiple historical planes. One important pioneer of this approach was Ernst Bloch, who attempted to contend with his own questions about world history and nationalism in terms of “non-simultaneity” or “non-contemporaneity” [*Ungleichzeitigkeit*] in his book *Heritage of Our Times* [*Erbschaft dieser Zeit*], which was first published in Germany in the spring of 1932. Here, under the chapter heading “Summary Transition: Non-Contemporaneity and Obligation to Its Dialectic,” Bloch articulates a dialectical theory of temporality that bears remarkable similarities to Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” However, while Benjamin conceives of the Now-time as that which opens up the possibility of blasting oppression out of the past, Bloch considers the remnants of past oppression as persisting in conflict with the present. As he writes: “The impoverished centre then, predominantly not of today, contradicts the Now, which lets it fall further and further, inwardly in a muffled way and outwardly with remnants which are alien to the Now.” For this reason, he argues that the sense of simultaneity in the present is in fact always already contradicted by the *non-contemporaneity* of differing historical pasts, which he in turn divides into two types: *subjective* and *objective*. He explains these complex distinctions in succinct terms as follows:

The *subjectively* non-contemporaneous element, after long being merely embittered, appears today as accumulated rage…. Corresponding to this is the *objectively* non-contemporaneous element as a continuing influence of older circumstances and forms of production, however much they may have been crossed through, as well as of older superstructures. The *objectively* non-contemporaneous element is that which is distant from and alien to the

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544 Koselleck, Reinhardt. *The Practice of Conceptual History*, 137
545 Koselleck, Reinhardt. *Futures Past*, 107
present; it thus embraces declining remnants and above all an unrefurbished past which is not yet “resolved” [aufgehoben] in capitalist terms.\textsuperscript{547}

Bloch further elaborates on these ideas in relation to what he calls “late capitalism,” a term that, while coined by Werner Sombart in 1902 and developed by Ernest Mandel in the early 1970s, has since come to be associated with Fredric Jameson’s theory of postmodernism. Under the sub-heading “The Problem of a Multi-Layered Dialectic” [Problem einer mehrschichtigen Dialektik], he writes:

The subjectively non-contemporaneous contradiction is accumulated rage, the objectively non-contemporaneous one unfinished past; the subjectively contemporaneous one is the free revolutionary action of the proletariat, the objectively contemporaneous one the prevented future contained in the Now, the prevented technological blessing, the prevented new society with which the old one is pregnant in its forces of production.\textsuperscript{548}

For Bloch, then, simultaneity or contemporaneity does not necessarily involve a gradual, consensus-building, normalizing or homogenizing temporality (even if it does potentially aim for a final synthesis or totalization), but rather a time of revolutionary, utopian possibility. In contrast to subjective non-simultaneity, as exemplified by the accumulated rage of the territorial Heimat, the subjectively simultaneous actually manifests itself in terms of postnationalist freedom. Meanwhile, whereas objective non-simultaneity persists in the sense of an unfinished or oppressed past, objective simultaneity entails the immediate sense of being able to overcome past oppression in the coming future.

Despite its enigmatic mysticism and revolutionary utopianism, Bloch’s argument for understanding world history as a “multi-layered,” “multi-temporal and multi-spatial dialectic” is akin in some ways to Arjun Appadurai’s more anthropological, non-dialectical conception of “disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy.” Both Bloch and Appadurai view historical multiplicity and plurality as remaining in tension with the “homogenous, empty time” of historicism and universal history, yet at the same time they also recognize the way in which increasing simultaneity is necessary for any worldly, cosmopolitan or postnationalist politics. For Bloch, it is because of the persistent, still unresolved conflict of the contemporaneous and non-contemporaneous that “world history” has not been synthesized into a universal totality. His notion of a “multi-layered dialectic” opposes universal history with an alternative vision of global plurality and multiplicity:

There thus arises, in order that the non-contemporaneous element can be mastered, the problem of a multi-layered revolutionary dialectic; for obviously the entirety of earlier development is not yet “resolved” [“aufgehoben”] in capitalism and its dialectic. World history, as the bourgeois

\textsuperscript{547} Bloch, \textit{Heritage of Our Times}, 108  
\textsuperscript{548} Bloch, \textit{Heritage of Our Times}, 113
revolutionary Börne already said, is a house which has more staircases than rooms.…  

Similarly, Appadurai conceives of globalization in terms of multiple “scapes” of global flows as well as multiple imagined worlds: “These landscapes thus are the building blocks of what (extending Benedict Anderson) I would like to call imagined worlds, that is, the multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe.” Drawing from Anderson’s conception of the nation as an “imagined community,” Appadurai argues that there are also a multiplicity of global “imaginaries” rather than a single, universally imagined world: “What I wish to suggest is that there has been a shift in recent decades, building on technological changes over the past century or so, in which the imagination has become a collective, social fact. This development, in turn, is the basis of the plurality of imagined worlds.”

For Appadurai, the imagination is neither a Kantian faculty of purposive reason nor a force of spiritual culture, but rather an organized field of collective practices and forms of labor that works to produce the world we live in:

The imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility...The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order.

In this way, Appadurai distinguishes the “projective sense” of the imagination from the idea of fantasy, for while fantasy inevitably connotes a certain private or even individualistic escapism, Appadurai argues that “It is the imagination, in its collective forms, that creates ideas of neighborhood and nationhood, of moral economics and unjust rule, of higher wages and foreign labor prospects. The imagination is today a staging ground for action, and not only for escape.”

It is with this image of the “staging ground for action” that I would like to end. For instead of lying on a flat plane, this progressive idea of the imagination requires a higher vantage point from which to perceive the multiple horizons of the future, as well as the multiplicity of historical pasts, while at the same time acting in the time of the now.

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549 Bloch, Heritage of Our Times, 114  
550 Appadurai, Modernity at Large, 33  
551 Appadurai, Modernity at Large, 5  
552 Appadurai, Modernity at Large, 31  
553 Appadurai, Modernity at Large, 7