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Dark Space

A whole history remains to be written of *spaces*—which would at the same time be the history of *powers* (both these terms in the plural)—from the great strategies of geo-politics to the little tactics of the habitat, institutional architecture from the classroom to the design of hospitals, passing via economic and political installations.

Michel Foucault, "The Eye of Power"

Space, in contemporary discourse, as in lived experience, has taken on an almost palpable existence. Its contours, boundaries, and geographies are called upon to stand in for all the contested realms of identity, from the national to the ethnic; its hollows and voids are occupied by bodies that replicate internally the external conditions of political and social struggle, and are likewise assumed to stand for, and identify, the sites of such struggle. Techniques of spatial occupation, of territorial mapping, of invasion and surveillance are seen as the instruments of social and individual control.

Equally, space is assumed to hide, in its darkest recesses and forgotten margins, all the objects of fear and phobia that have returned with such insistency to haunt the imaginations of those who have tried to stake out spaces to protect their health and happiness. Indeed, space as threat, as harbinger of the unseen, operates as medical and psychical metaphor for all the possible erosions of bourgeois bodily and social well being. The body, indeed, has become its own exterior, as its cell structure has become the object of spatial modeling that maps its own sites of immunological battle and describes the forms of its antibodies. "Outside," even as the spaces of exile, asylum, confinement, and quarantine of the early modern period were con-

tinuously spilling over into the "normal" space of the city, so the "pathological" spaces of today menace the clearly marked out limits of the social order. In every case "light space" is invaded by the figure of "dark space," on the level of the body in the form of epidemic and uncontrollable disease, and on the level of the city in the person of the homeless. In other words, the realms of the organic space of the body and the social space in which that body lives and works, domains clearly enough distinguished in the nineteenth century, as François Delaporte has shown, no longer can be identified as separate.¹

In what follows I want to examine only one aspect of this new condition, one that touches on its implications for monumental architecture and more generally on the theorization of spatial conditions after Foucault. I will, that is, analyze the visual construction of images and objects that refer to this dark side of space in the modern period, as a way of approaching a more complex and (I hope) more politically subtle interpretation of subject-space relations than that offered by the conventional wisdom of modern urbanism (flood dark space with light) or architecture (open up all space to vision and occupation).

In the elaboration of the complex history of modern space following the initiatives of Foucault, historians and theorists have largely concentrated their attention on the overtly political role of *transparent* space—that paradigm of total control championed by Jeremy Bentham and recuperated under the guise of "hygienic space" by modernists led by Le Corbusier in the twentieth century. Transparency, it was thought, would eradicate the domain of myth, suspicion, tyranny, and above all the irrational. The rational grids and hermetic enclosures of institutions from hospitals to prisons; the surgical opening up of cities to circulation, light, and air; the therapeutic design of dwellings and settlements; these have all been subjected to analysis for their hidden contents, their capacity to instrumentalize the politics of surveillance through what Bentham termed "universal transparency." Historians have preferred to study this myth of "power through transparency," especially in its evident complicity with the technologies of the modern movement and their "utopian" applications to architecture and urbanism.

Yet such a spatial paradigm was, as Foucault pointed out, constructed out of an initial fear, the fear of Enlightenment in the face

of "darkened spaces, of the pall of gloom which prevents the full visibility of things, men and truths." It was this very fear of the dark that led, in the late eighteenth century, to the fascination with those same shadowy areas—the "fantasy-world of stone walls, darkness, hideouts and dungeons"—the precise "negative of the transparency and visibility which it is aimed to establish."² The moment that saw the creation of the first "considered politics of spaces" based on scientific concepts of light and infinity also saw, and within the same epistemology, the invention of a spatial phenomenology of darkness.

Late eighteenth-century architects were entirely aware of this double vision. Etienne-Louis Boullée, who was among the first to apply the newly outlined precepts of the Burkean sublime to the design of public institutions, exploited all the visual and sensational powers of what Burke had called "absolute light" to characterize his projects for metropolitan cathedrals and halls of justice. He was equally obsessed with absolute darkness as the most powerful instrument to induce that state of fundamental terror claimed by Burke as the instigator of the sublime. His design for a Palace of Justice confronted the two worlds, light and dark, in a telling allegory of enlightenment; the cubiform justice halls, lit from above, are set on top of a half-buried podium containing the prisons. "It seemed to me," Boullée wrote, "that in presenting this august palace raised on the shadowy lair of crime, I would not only be able to enoble architecture by means of the oppositions that resulted, but further present in a metaphorical way the imposing picture of vice crushed beneath the feet of justice."³

It was perhaps not by chance that Boullée's reflections on the dark were elaborated during the period of his enforced withdrawal from public life under the real Terror—one that Robespierre himself had described as predicated on the necessities of the "political sublime." During this internal exile, sometime in the mid-1790s, Boullée recounted his "experiments" in light and shade as he walked by night in the woods surrounding his home:

Finding myself in the countryside, I skirted a wood by the light of the moon. My effigy produced by its light excited my attention (assuredly this was not a novelty for me). By a particular disposition of the mind, the effect of this simulacrum seemed to me to be of an extreme sadness. The trees drawn on the ground by their shadows made the most profound impression on me. This picture grew in my imagination. I then saw everything that was the

most somber in nature. What did I see? The mass of objects detached in black against a light of extreme pallor. Nature seemed to offer itself, in mourning, to my sight. Struck by the sentiments I felt, I occupied myself, from this moment on, in making its particular application to architecture.

Out of his experiences, Boullée formed a notion of an architecture that would speak of death. It should be low and compressed in proportions—a “buried architecture” that literally embodied the burial it symbolized. It should express the extreme melancholy of mourning by means of its stripped and naked walls, “deprived of all ornament.” It should, finally, following the model of the architect’s shadow, be articulated to the sight by means of shadows:

One must, as I have tried to do in funerary monuments, present the skeleton of architecture by means of an absolutely naked wall, presenting the image of buried architecture by employing only low and compressed proportions, sinking into the earth, forming, finally, by means of materials absorbent to the light, the black picture of an architecture of shadows depicted by the effect of even blacker shadows.

Boullée gave the example of a Temple of Death, a temple front etched, so to speak, in shadow form on a flat plane of light-absorbent material—a virtual architecture of negativity. Boullée was proud of his “invention”: “This genre of architecture formed by shadows is a discovery of the art that belongs to me. It is a new career that I have opened up. Either I fool myself, or artists will not disdain to follow it.”⁴ Certainly his younger contemporaries were quick to seize on the sublime potentials of this abyssal vision of mortuary form. Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, in particular, made the architecture of death a point of departure for a reverie on the infinite scale of the universe and the absolute “nothingness” of the void after life.

And yet, in retrospect, what is fascinating about Boullée’s account is not so much its commonplace references to darkness, nor its fashionable appeal to Egyptian motifs on the eve of Napoleon’s expedition, but rather its projection of a “skeleton” of architecture from the basis of the human shadow. This shadow, or “effigy” as Boullée called it, prefiguring the disappearance of the body into darkness, was both a haunting “double” for Boullée himself and a model for imitation in architecture. On one level, Boullée was following the traditional idea of architecture “imitating” the perfection of the human body in massing and proportions, inverting the theory in order to make an

architecture based on the “death form” of the body, shadowed on the ground. But beyond this Boullée created a veritable “simulacrum” of the buried body in architecture: the building, already half sunken, compressed in its proportions as if by a great weight from above, imitated not a standing figure (as classical Vitruvian theory would have demanded) but a form that was already recumbent, itself depicted on the ground as a negative space. This prone figure was then raised up, so to speak, in order to mark the facade of Boullée’s temple, now become an image of a specter: a monument to death that represented an ambiguous moment, somewhere between life and death, or, rather, a shadow of the living dead. In this way, Boullée prefigured the nineteenth-century preoccupation with the double as the harbinger of death, or as the shadow of the unburied dead.

In this doubling of the double, Boullée was thus setting up a play between architecture (art of imitation, of doubling) and death (imaged in the double) in a way that gave tangible force to Enlightenment fears. As Sarah Kofman has argued in her analysis of Freud’s essay on “The Uncanny,” “erected to conquer death, art, as a ‘double’, like any double, itself turns into an image of death. The game of art is a game of death, which already implies death in life, as a force of saving and inhibition.” Boullée’s death image, with its shadow inscription mirroring the shape of its dark facade or “ground,” plays insistently on this theme that, as Freud pointed out, has to do with “the constant recurrence of the same thing,” or repetition. Kofman comments,

[Freud’s] “The Uncanny” indicates this transformation of the algebraic sign of the double, its link with narcissism and death as the punishment for having sought immortality, for having wanted to “kill” the father. It is perhaps no accident that the model of the “double,” erected for the first time by the Egyptians, is found in the figuration of castration in dreams, the doubling of the genital organ.⁵

Boullée, in these terms, might well have invented, if not the first architectural figuration of death, certainly the first self-conscious architecture of the uncanny, a prescient experiment in the projection of “dark space.” For by flattening his shadow, so to speak, on the surface of a building that was itself nothing but (negative) surface, Boullée had created an image of an architecture not only without real depth, but one that deliberately played on the ambiguities be-

tween absolute flatness and infinite depth, between his own shadow and the void. The building, as the double of the death of the subject, translated this disappearance into experienced spatial uncertainty.

Here the limits of Foucault's interpretation of Enlightenment space become evident. Still tied to the Enlightenment's own phenomenology of light and dark, clear and obscure, his insistence on the operation of power through *transparency*, the panoptic principle, resists exploration of the extent to which the pairing of transparency and obscurity is essential for power to operate. For it is in the intimate associations of the two, their uncanny ability to slip from one to the other, that the sublime as instrument of fear retains its hold—in that ambiguity that stages the presence of death in life, dark space in bright space. In this sense, all the radiant spaces of modernism, from the first Panopticon to the Ville Radieuse, should be seen as calculated not on the final triumph of light over dark but precisely on the insistent presence of the one in the other.

Indeed, on another level, Boullée's design puts into question the generally assumed identity of the spatial and the monumental in Foucault's system. Foucault posited a virtual homology between the institutional politics of panopticism and their monumental crystallizations in the form of building types from the hospital to the prison and beyond, thus setting in motion the critique of modernist typologies that began in the late 1960s; the *spatial* dimension here seems to act as a universal flux bonding political and architectural or monumental. But our analysis of Boullée might suggest that the spatial is rather a dimension that incipiently opposes the monumental: not only does it work to contextualize the individual monument into a general map of spatial forces that stretch from the building to the city and thence to entire territories—something recognized by the situationists, and, in another context, by Henri Lefebvre—but it also operates, by way of the negative bodily projection we have described, to absorb the monument altogether.

Boullée's relentless desire to mimic the "engulfing" of the subject into the void of death, a desire itself mimicked by Ledoux when he speaks of composing "an image of nothingness" in his Cemetery project of 1785, thus ends in the engulfing of monumentality itself. For the rational grids and spatial orders that mark the laying out of the panoptical system in the late eighteenth century are, in the Temple of Death, nowhere present; there is literally no *plan* for this

monument to nothingness. Its sole mark is a facade as infinitely thin and insubstantial as the idea of redoubled darkness—a facade moreover that is precariously balanced between above and below, vertical and horizontal. Here the bodily substantiality of the traditional monument and the palpable spatial identity of the controlling institution dissolve into a mirror of the projection of a disappearing subject. Space, that is, has operated as an instrument of monumental dissolution.

The homology thus established between subject and space seems, on the subjective as well as on the monumental level, to emulate what Roger Caillois referred to as "legendary psychasthenia," that "temptation by space" that seemed to operate in the realm of insect mimicry and that offered so many analogies to human experience. Caillois was fascinated by the loss of any distinction between the insect and its surroundings during the process of camouflaging identity, its tendency to assimilate to its milieu; he pointed out that this did not always correspond to the best possible defense against death. The insect that looked like the leaf on which it was seated could equally be destroyed or eaten along with the leaf. Such loss of identity, he argued, would be a kind of pathological luxury, even "a dangerous luxury." As in imitation in the arts, such mimicry depended on the distortion of spatial vision, on the breaking down of the normal process by which spatial perception situates the subject clearly in space and in opposition to it:

There can be no doubt that the perception of space is a complex phenomenon: space is indissolubly perceived and represented. From this standpoint it is a double dihedral changing at every moment in size and position: a *dihedral of action* whose horizontal plane is formed by the ground and the vertical plane by the man himself who walks and who, by this fact, carries the dihedral along with him; and a *dihedral of representation* determined by the same horizontal plane as the previous one (but represented and not perceived) intersected vertically at the distance where the object appears. It is with represented space that the drama becomes specific, since the living creature, the organism, is no longer the origin of the coordinates, but one point among others; it is dispossessed of its privilege and literally *no longer knows where to place itself*. One can already recognize the characteristic scientific attitude and, indeed, it is remarkable that represented spaces are just what is multiplied by contemporary science: Finsler's spaces, Fermat's spaces, Riemann-Christoffel's hyper-space, abstract, generalized, open, and closed spaces, spaces dense in themselves, thinned out, and so on. The feeling of

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personality, considered as the organism's feeling of distinction from its surroundings, of the connection between consciousness and a particular point in space, cannot fail under these conditions to be seriously undermined; one then enters into the psychology of psychasthenia, and more specifically of *legendary psychasthenia*, if we agree to use this name for the disturbance in the above relations between personality and space.⁸

Following the psychological studies of Pierre Janet, Caillois compared such a disturbance to that experienced by certain schizophrenics when, in response to the question "where are you?", they invariably responded "I know where I am, but I do not feel as though I'm at the spot where I find myself." Caillois seemed to be relating such spatial disorientation to the pathology of derealization discussed by Freud, and beyond this to the host of spatial phobias, from agoraphobia to acrophobia and claustrophobia, identified in the late nineteenth century. Like sufferers from agoraphobia, described by Carl Otto Westphal in 1871, Caillois saw the schizophrenic literally eaten up by space:

To these dispossessed souls, space seems to be a devouring force. Space pursues them, encircles them, digests them in a gigantic phagocytosis. It ends by replacing them. Then the body separates itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses. He tries to look at *himself from* any point whatever in space. He feels himself becoming space, *dark space where things cannot be put*. He is similar, not similar to something, but just *similar*. And he invents spaces of which he is "the convulsive possession."⁹

This spatial condition of the devoured subject Caillois assimilated to the experience, described by Eugène Minkowski, of "dark space," a space that is lived under the conditions of depersonalization and assumed absorption. Minkowski, distinguishing between "light space" and "dark space," saw dark space as a living entity, experienced, despite its lack of visual depth and visible extension, as deep: "an opaque and unlimited sphere wherein all the radii are the same, black and mysterious."¹⁰ For Caillois, Minkowski's formulation approximated his own self-induced experience of psychasthenia, explaining among other symptoms his (much intensified) "fear of the dark," rooted once more in "the peril in which it puts the opposition between the organism and the milieu." In Minkowski and Caillois, darkness is not the simple absence of light:

There is something positive about it. While light space is eliminated by the materiality of objects, darkness is "filled," it touches the individual directly, envelops him, penetrates him, and even passes through him: hence "the ego is *permeable* for darkness while it is not so for light"; the feeling of mystery that one experiences at night would not come from anything else. Minkowski likewise comes to speak of *dark space* and almost of a lack of distinction between the milieu and the organism: "Dark space envelops me on all sides and penetrates me much deeper than light space; the distinction between inside and outside and consequently the sense organs as well, insofar as they are designed for external perception, here play only a totally modest role."¹¹

The notion of an impulsion toward a loss of the subject into dark space, linked directly by Caillois both to the death drive and to certain forms of aesthetic mimicry, thus returns us to Boullée's experience of impending death in the forest outside Paris, and more directly to its monumental mimicry. We might now say that the Temple of Death, as monument, mimics the subject's own impulsion to be tempted by space, a monument that suffers, so to speak, from *legendary psychasthenia*.