

The Politics of the Visor:
Looking at Buildings Looking at Us

Matthew Beaumont

Beware of Dwellings. They are not always hospitable.
Edmond Jabès, *The Return to the Book*

I. Introduction

Do we feel at home in the cities we inhabit? There are of course innumerable ways in which ordinary people, especially the poor and those from marginalized social groups, experience an almost permanent sense of displacement in the urban environments in which they live, even if the consolations of belonging to a particular, more or less organic, community can at times alleviate this precarious state of being. There are forms of economic exclusion, political exclusion and social exclusion – competing and overlapping in complex, shifting patterns – that determinately shape the everyday lives of individuals in cities, especially in so far as these are also defined by gendered, racial and religious identities. The built environment actively contributes to these modes of displacement; and in the early twenty-first century it is probably more aggressive in prosecuting or reinforcing this politics of exclusion than ever before. As Margit Mayer has written in the pages of this journal, ‘cities have transformed into gated communities and privatized public spaces, where wealthy and poor districts are increasingly separated by invisible barriers, and access of the poor to the amenities and infrastructures that cities once held for all have become more and more restricted’ (Mayer, 2009, p. 367).

The specifically urban forms of alienation and exclusion to which I have alluded are perhaps most acutely experienced by those classified by the state, for transparently ideological purposes, as illegal immigrants and refugees. But there is also a chronic and pervasive sense of unease that, whoever we are, and from wherever we have come, is virtually constitutive of our experiences of living in cities. No doubt it was this existential as well as social condition that theorists of the metropolis, from at least the advent of the industrial European city in the nineteenth century, diagnosed in their accounts of its intrinsically alienating effects. The individual’s need for ‘self-preservation in the face of the large city’, as Georg Simmel famously expressed it in ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’ (1903), requires as its prerequisite a ‘mental attitude’ that he designated in terms of ‘reserve’ (Simmel, 1997, p. 179). The reserved disposition that the individual self-protectively adopts in relation to the urban environment he or she inhabits presupposes, and at the same time compounds, a state of dissimulation that perpetually vitiates his or her sense of assimilation. Perhaps cities, at least in the alienated conditions of capitalist society, are precisely those social collectives in which, as a matter of definition, no one ever feels completely at home. The fundamental, if not predominant, phenomenological experience of the built environment, from this perspective, is one of discomfort (on the phenomenological

interpretation of architecture, which comprises an extensive literature of course, see for example Bloomer and Moore, 1977; Norberg-Schulz, 1980; and, more recently, Shirazi, 2014).

In this article, which is inspired in part by ‘The Conspiracy of Architecture’, the novelist China Miéville’s brilliantly imaginative, but at the same time rigorously materialist, analysis of ‘the *animate, alien building*’ (Miéville, 1998, p. 1), I propose to explore some aspects of the role that buildings play in reinforcing both the concrete and more abstract forms of this feeling of not being at home in the urban environment. In this sense, it constitutes a contribution to the discussion, across a range of disciplines, of people’s physical and existential experiences of architecture, and their relation to what Juhani Pallasmaa, in a polemic about the embodied relationship of individual citizens to urban buildings, has called ‘the pathology of everyday architecture’ (Pallasmaa, 1996, p. 6). To put it in phenomenological terms, I am interested not simply in how we relate to buildings, as sentient beings, but in how buildings, as effectively animate entities, relate to us (Bruno Latour, in his Actor-Network Theory, has pioneered the assumption that buildings ‘act’, not least because they arouse ‘a sense of wellbeing or an impulse to flee’ (see Steets, 2016, p. 99)). To put it in psychopathological terms, so to speak, I am interested not only in how we look at buildings but, more significantly still, in how buildings look at us; that is, in how we internalize the gaze of buildings.

In the second section of this article, applying Slavoj Žižek’s fertile notion of the ‘architectural parallax’, in addition to other theoretical resources, including Freud, I examine the ways in which we negotiate buildings and buildings negotiate us; and I explore the ways in which, in some fundamental sense, they reinforce a sense of the city’s uncanniness, its unhomeliness. In the third section, I then detail the ways in which a specific type of contemporary architecture, which I characterize in terms of its ‘visored’ facades, dramatizes the intrusive, even offensive, relation to the individual outlined in the preceding section. In developing the concept of the visor, I revisit some of the ideas and tropes explored by the philosopher Jacques Derrida in his *Specters of Marx* (1994). Finally, in a brief conclusion that implicitly, if playfully, responds to the demands of critics such as Tahl Kaminer (Kaminer, 2017), who rightly insist on the importance of contemporary citizens’ active participation in the politics of architecture, I propose a symptomatic, or more precisely homeopathic, solution to the pathological relation in which these visored buildings, indeed urban buildings in general, situate us. What Alejandro Zaera Polo has pursued in the shape of a ‘politics of the envelope’ lies behind my reflections, throughout this article, on what I call the politics of the visor (Zaera Polo, 2008).

These reflections, it can be added, also comprise a contribution to recent debates – promoted in this journal among other publications – about the ‘right to the city’. Peter Marcuse has helpfully reminded us that this Lefebvrian slogan, which dates from the late 1960s, articulates both a ‘demand’ and a ‘cry’ – the demand of ‘those who are excluded’ and the cry of ‘those who are alienated’. ‘The demand is for the material necessities of life,’ he elaborates, ‘the aspiration is for a broader right to what is necessary beyond the material to lead a satisfying life’ (Marcuse, 2009, p. 190). It seems to me that this aspirational or even spiritual dimension of the right to the city, which is absolutely inseparable from the material dimension, should among other things entail the right to feel at home in the built environment in which we live. Certainly, as Christian Norberg-Schulz once put it, ‘one gets along without feeling “at home”’ (Norberg-Schulz, 1980, p. 20). But why should we accept this state of

permanent displacement? Why should we have to learn to live with a habitual feeling of not being at home?

This article investigates the unhomeliness of the urban environment, for diagnostic purposes, in terms of the spectral gaze, or ‘visor effect’, that is encoded in individual buildings. It does so in the belief that belonging in the city should be a necessary corollary of being in the city.

II. The Architectural Parallax

The chapter on architecture in Zizek’s *Living in the End Times* (2011) consists of a fascinating ‘interlude’, as he calls it, in which he develops the concept of the ‘architectural parallax’. The word ‘parallax’, which is derived from the Greek verb *parallassein*, meaning ‘to alternate’, is in its ordinary sense the apparent difference in an object, or the position of an object, when it is viewed from different perspectives.

Cubist painting, to develop an example at which Zizek merely hints, could be productively characterized as a sustained and elaborate attempt to capture a parallax view of the object. A painting like Picasso’s ‘Violin Hanging on the Wall’ (1912-13), to take a picture almost at random, reconstitutes the image of the instrument itself, and its relation to the wall on which it is hanging, as if the painter is repeatedly shifting his perspective. It apprehends the violin not simply as a three-dimensional object but a four-dimensional one; that is, an object situated in time as well as space. The painter’s dynamic, unstable point of observation compels the shapes, planes and angles of the composition to intersect with one another as if they are conducting an elegant, complicated dance in time. And in addition, the ‘parallax’ form of the cubist aesthetic folds the viewer herself into the dynamics of the picture, collapsing subject into object. This is not a still life so much as an unstill one.

But Zizek, who is leaning in this book on the Japanese philosopher Kojin Karatani’s account of the antinomies in Kant’s thought, emphasizes that, philosophically speaking, this apparent difference in an object when it is viewed from alternative perspectives is more than simply subjective; it is, in effect, objective. ‘An “epistemological” shift in the subject’s point of view,’ he writes, ‘always reflects an “ontological” shift in the object itself’ (Zizek, 2011, p. 244). Picasso’s violin, to return to that example, is constitutively transformed by the dynamic decomposition that is the result of the painter’s shifting perspectives. There is, then, something objectively as well as subjectively unsettling about this process, so to speak. The object, in the shifting perspective of the parallax, is both itself and not itself. It is non-identical with itself. The parallax view therefore renders the object uncanny. It imparts a kind of alien life to it. Think of a photograph in which, because the camera has been accidentally moved during the exposure, the object or person captured is not only blurred but visible from two slightly distinct angles. Or look at Francis Bacon’s portraits, which feature faces that are prone to a forceful, even violent torsion. This ghostly, monstrous effect registers the inscription of what Zizek calls the ‘parallax gap’, the interval or passage between changing, competing perspectives.

How does this relate to architecture? Zizek underlines his point that, in this context, the parallax gap is ‘not just a matter of shifting perspective (from one standpoint, a building looks a certain way – if I move a bit, it looks different)’. For it also marks a radically destabilizing shift in the building’s very identity, its individuality (in the literal sense of its indivisibility). ‘Things get interesting,’ he suggests, ‘when we notice that the gap is inscribed into the “real” building itself – as

if the building, in its very material existence, bears the imprint of different and mutually exclusive perspectives.’ He continues:

When we succeed in identifying a parallax gap in a building, the gap between the two perspectives thus opens up a place for a third, virtual building. In this way, we can also define the creative moment of architecture: it concerns not merely or primarily the actual building, but the virtual space of new possibilities opened up by the actual building. Furthermore, the parallax gap in architecture means that the spatial disposition of a building cannot be understood without reference to the temporal dimension: the parallax gap *is* the inscription of our changing temporal experience when we approach and enter a building. (Zizek, 2011, pp. 244-5)

The spectral building invoked or provoked by this encounter with the material building in time as well as space – that is, in the context of everyday life – is then apparently an instance of what Anthony Vidler, extrapolating from Freud, has called ‘the architectural uncanny’ (Vidler, 1992). But, if this is the case, it is an iteration of it that, significantly, is not the contingent or circumstantial property of a particular home, or a particular style of architecture, such as the postmodern, but is in fact positively structural to the built environment. For, if the urban fabric is grasped in Zizek’s terms rather than Vidler’s, the uncanny is effectively constitutive of architecture.

Freud’s influential notion of the *unheimlich*, the unhomely or uncanny, which he identified as a ‘special class of the frightening’, centres on the disconcerting obtrusion of the unconscious into conscious existence. Published in 1919, his essay was an attempt to overcome the theoretical limitations of the only previous essay on the topic, by the German psychologist Ernst Jentsch, who had argued in 1906 that a sense of the uncanny is invariably generated in the subject by the sudden appearance of an alien or unexpected object. The *unheimlich* was for Jentsch associated with the characteristic moment of uncertainty experienced by the human intellect as it half-reluctantly tries to assimilate an unfamiliar phenomenon to its understanding of the world, as when a wax model momentarily seems to be animate. He reassured his readers, however, that this sense of disorientation could be overcome by sheer intellectual mastery. Freud disputed Jentsch’s complacent rationalist assumption: he insisted that his predecessor’s interpretation was incomplete because, according to his logic, ‘the better oriented in his environment a person is, the less readily will he get the impression of something uncanny in regard to the objects and events in it’ (Freud, 1990, 341). Freud argued, in contradistinction, that it is precisely when one feels at home in an environment that one is most susceptible to the uniquely subversive influence of the uncanny. ‘The uncanny,’ he stated at the outset, ‘is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar’ (Freud, 1990, 340).

Freud buttressed the central claim of his article with an etymological examination of the term *heimlich*, which on the one hand means ‘what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight’ (Freud, 1990, 345). The uncanny marks the moment at which, according to Freud, the familiar becomes unfamiliar, and the unfamiliar, at the same time, comes to seem all too familiar. The house is for this reason the *locus classicus* of the uncanny, as Freud concedes when he observes that the example of ‘a *haunted* house’ is ‘perhaps the most striking of all, of something uncanny’ (Freud 1990, 364). The entity that people most take for granted, where they supposedly most feel at home, the house, is peculiarly uncanny when it is revealed to be secretly hostile to those that inhabit it.

The *heim* is, in both an etymological and a phenomenological sense, the root of the *unheimlich*. The built environment is, then, especially susceptible to the logic of the uncanny. We presume in our everyday lives that it is hospitable to us because it is the product of our collective labours, but it is in fact secretly opposed to us. Buildings watch us with suspicion. We feel ourselves observed by them and, as in the example of the ‘dread of the evil eye’, which Freud adduces as another classic instance of the uncanny, we fear ‘a secret intention of doing harm’ (Freud, 1990, 362). All houses, in a sense, are haunted, because they are susceptible to the dynamics of the architectural parallax. They are both themselves and not themselves.

In his book on the architectural uncanny, Vidler reconstructed a kind of archaeology of the trope, running from early nineteenth-century Romanticism through to early twentieth-century avant-gardism, in order to understand the unhomey aspect of domestic buildings as this has impinged historically both on literature and the built environment. His inspiration was historically proximate, as the book’s suitably baroque opening sentence indicated:

Intrigued by the unsettling qualities of much contemporary architecture – its fragmented neoconstructivist forms mimetic of dismembered bodies, its public representation buried in earthworks or lost in mirror reflection, its ‘seeing walls’ reciprocating the passive gaze of domestic cyborgs, its spaces surveyed by moving eyes and simulating ‘transparency,’ its historical monuments indistinguishable from glossy reproductions – I have been drawn to explore aspects of the spatial and architectural uncanny, as it has been characterized in literature, philosophy, psychology, and architecture from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the present. (Vidler, 1992, p. ix)

Vidler traced a fascination, inherited from Freud, both with ‘the hidden terrors of the house’, as an architectural space, and with what he identified as the ‘dedomesticated subject’ that inhabits it (Vidler, 1992, p. x).

But for Vidler, as I have implied, the uncanny implicitly remained an alien fragment lodged in the familiar fabric of the building, as opposed to an irreducible, indeed ‘ontological’, dimension of its form. Žižek’s concept of the ‘virtual building’ – which is necessarily precipitated by the interaction between the individual subject, moving through space and time, and the building’s architectural form – seems to me an important development (albeit one that is susceptible to the charge of ahistoricism). I propose to refine it a little here, though, or to displace it slightly perhaps, by situating it more explicitly in relationship to the trope of the uncanny, by reconceptualizing the virtual building in terms of the idea of the spectral building. And I intend to refine or displace it too by rethinking the building’s ontology in terms of what Derrida, in a neat pun that is of characteristically serious intent, calls ‘hauntology’.

The concept of hauntology is Derrida’s relatively late attempt, as part of his relentless deconstruction of the metaphysical tradition, to think the ‘logic of haunting’ as opposed to the logic of being. Ontology ‘speaks only of what is present or what is absent; it cannot conceive of what is neither,’ as Warren Montag has argued (Montag, 1999, p. 71). Hauntology speaks of the neither, and the both, that is the spectral. Here, I want to insist on the hauntology of architecture; that is, on the hauntological house, and not merely, as Vidler does, on the haunted house. Derrida talks in *Specters of Marx* of ‘the virtual space of spectrality’ (Derrida, 1994, p. 11), and what I am positing here, with respect to Žižek’s virtual building, is simply the obverse of that, the spectral space of virtuality.

This essay, to reiterate, centres on how buildings look at us quite as much as on how we look at buildings. It focuses on how they look at us when we look at them; on how they look at us both when we participate in what Alberto Pérez-Gómez called architecture's 'space-matter' (Pérez-Gómez, 2006, p. 23) and when we enter into their field of social, and political, relations. The dynamics of this force field, which is necessarily constituted and reconstituted not in the abstract but in the historical conditions of time and space, as David Harvey's studies of 'relational space' have amply demonstrated, are of course extremely complicated (Harvey, 2009). After all, 'architecture is rarely experienced as an isolated autonomous object'; urban space, in fact, is 'encountered as being connected, made up by interrelations between buildings rather than the impact of buildings on their own' (Grubbauer, 2014, p. 340; see also Degen and Rose, 2012). But my specific claim, in spite of the risk of simplification, is that the parallax gap that opens up between two or more competing, interpenetrating perspectives on a particular building – when, for example, we turn a corner in a city and approach it – is, precisely, the spectral architectural point from which the building looks back at us. It is the ghostly site at which its hauntology materializes or momentarily becomes visible.

As we move about in their spatiotemporal orbit, all buildings look back at us from some virtual vantage point. 'Our changing temporal experience when we approach and enter a building,' to borrow Žižek's phrase again, animates this building and imparts a kind of life to it. And that life, finally, is an alien one. The building is a Thing, in so far as it embodies the gaze of a Subject but at the same time does not subjectivize itself. In this way the individual is trapped in the logic, imprisoned in the perspective, of the Other-Thing (see Žižek, 1992, p. 252). A classic example might be Mother's house, perched above the Bates Motel, in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), which from the moment it is first seen trains its uncanny gaze on the events that take place on the concourse beneath it. Paradoxically, it is the antiseptic motel, and not the crumbling gothic mansion, that is the haunted house in this movie, for the simple reason that the former is haunted by the latter. Both are virtual buildings, in that they occupy the parallax gap between the competing perspectives that Hitchcock's camera traces, but Mother's house is also spectral building. *Psycho* is a movie about a haunting house, a house that haunts, as much as a haunted one.

But there is a fundamental historical sense in which every building is always already haunting, as Miéville demonstrates in his persuasive attempt 'to show that the image of the animate, alien building is explicable as an aesthetic response to the peculiar alienated relation between humanity and architecture under capitalism' (Miéville, 1998, p. 2). For the alienness, the non-humanness, of buildings is at root social and economic. It is a structural effect of alienation, of the alienated relations that prevail under capitalism; that is, a mode of production in which, as Marx's theory of commodity fetishism in *Capital* indicates, producers are ruled by their products, and these products, including buildings, which are profoundly implicated in the capitalist marketplace, consequently come to seem animate, autonomous, and endowed with an independent power. All buildings, all houses, are in this sense alien. To overstate the matter a little, we might say of the built environment, as Sartre said of the world, that it is 'human but not anthropomorphic' (see Sartre, 2016, p. 114). It remains at some fundamental level resistant to the attempt to domesticate it. And the alien life, the alien gaze, of buildings is a structural effect of this. The parallax gap is thus historically, as well as ontologically, inscribed in buildings.

So the commodity status of a building in capitalist society renders it intrinsically haunted, intrinsically other than itself (like Marx's dancing table in

Capital, Volume One). But there is of course an additional, rather more ordinary sense in which ‘the alienation of building from dweller is the result of the mediation of the market’, and inevitably this too is relevant (Miéville, 1998, p. 18). Most producers, as consumers, do not own the house they inhabit. Moreover, they are excluded from the vast majority of buildings, in so far as these are privately rather than publicly owned. For this reason, their homes, like the buildings that surround them, are necessarily what Marx, in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, characterizes as:

a hostile dwelling, an ‘alien, restraining power which only gives itself up to him in so far as he gives up to it his blood and sweat’ – a dwelling which he cannot regard as his own home where he might at last exclaim, ‘Here I am at home,’ but where instead he finds himself in *someone else’s* house, in the house of a *stranger* who daily lies in wait for him and throws him out if he does not pay his rent. (Marx, 1964, pp. 155-6)

Under capitalism, it might be said, all buildings embody an alien, restrictive power, and people are engaged in a constant, if largely unconscious, attempt to tame and domesticate them, to force them to surrender themselves to us. Consciously and unconsciously, people are perpetually trying to make themselves at home in the built environment.

It is as part of this ceaseless struggle between buildings and people that the former look at the latter defensively, even offensively. In hosting us, in apparently accommodating us, buildings function as an enemy host; they are hostile. The ‘complementary relation’ that Arnold Berleant has identified ‘between building and site and between both of these and the human user’ is, at root, antagonistic too (Berleant, 1988, p. 97). But buildings also function in ways that are ghostly – as the etymological tangle of host, guest and ghost, which all have a common root in the word *ghos-ti*, suggests (Miller, 1988, p. 281). Perhaps, then, buildings are not simply potentially inhospitable, as the French Egyptian poet Edmond Jabès implies in the epigraph to this piece, but constitutively inhospitable. Perhaps, in spite of their obdurate materiality, they are not only innately alien but intrinsically ghostly. Here, again, is the house as a hauntological entity.

III. The Visor Effect

The gaze of buildings is hostile, armed. My concrete interest in this article is on those buildings that, because and not in spite of the fact that they half-conceal, half-reveal their alien, hostile gaze, exhibit with peculiar clarity the spectral logic I have invoked. Specifically, I mean buildings that are, as I characterize them, visored.

The word ‘visor’ seems to me to be a useful term for thinking about the appearance of buildings in part because it is closely related to the word ‘façade’. Just as the latter is derived from the French *face*, the former is etymologically related to the French *visage* – both signifying the face. But where the word façade connotes a building’s openness to the world on which it looks (the street or garden or whatever), the word visor connotes its closedness, its defensiveness. Lefebvre observes that the façade has often been viewed ‘as a face or countenance perceived as expressive, and turned not towards an ideal spectator but towards the particular viewer’; but he also points out that, to the extent that it is the basis for an ‘organic analogy’, or an organicist ideology, it might be added, there is something ‘fraudulent’ about it. The façade ‘implies a front and a back – what is shown and what is not shown – and thus

constitutes a seeming extension into social space of an asymmetry which arose rather late in the evolution of living organisms as a response to the needs of attack and defence' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 273). The façade is armoured; it is part of the struggle through which buildings force us to surrender to them. Zaera Polo comments in 'The Politics of the Envelope' that 'the power of architecture is not just iconographic but also organizational' (Zaera Polo, 2008, p. 78). I would add, more specifically and more pointedly, that the power of the façade is not just iconographic and organizational, but territorial, martial. If the façade is a face, it is visored face.

In English, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the Anglo-Norman word 'visor', which came into use in the fourteenth century, signifies 'the front part of a helmet, covering the face but provided with holes or openings to admit of seeing and breathing, and capable of being raised and lowered'. To put it metaphorically, it is a form of facial fortification; and its design, which features apertures, slits and even a sort of portcullis, is indeed not unlike the front elevation of a castle. For obvious reasons, in the Middle Ages the word visor also came to mean 'a mask to conceal the face'; a vizard. And by the sixteenth century it was being used figuratively to signify both 'a face or countenance; an outward aspect or appearance', and a disguise, 'an outward appearance or show under which something different is hid'. In these two senses it was cognate with the word façade, which also means both an outward appearance and an artful deceit.

Perhaps, then, in order to defamiliarize the exterior of buildings and to restore a political dimension to them, we need to displace the term façade from our architectural vocabulary and employ the term visor instead. The façade needs to be unmasked, which means it needs to be exposed as a visor. Zizek, in his reflections on architecture, notes that the 'basic issue' he is addressing can be condensed in this question: 'How does an ideological edifice (real architectural edifices included) deal with social antagonisms?' (Zizek, 2011, p. 253). It is surely in this sense, among others, that 'the fate of capitalist society is not at all extraneous to architectural design', as Manfredo Tafuri formulated it in *Architecture and Utopia* (Tafuri, 1976, p. 179). In so far as ideology is inscribed in the façade of an architectural edifice – and the façade is a privileged site in this regard – it makes sense to think of all buildings as having visors.

It seems especially appropriate, though, in the context of a contemporary metropolis like London, where a 'new generation of private shrines', in the shape of corporate buildings that compete with older civic monuments, 'stand like self-assured and self-sufficient fortresses, neither needing nor desiring to engage with public space.' 'Despite making a loud public statement,' Maria Kaika and Korinna Thielen continue, 'they nevertheless look inwards and more often than not even try to "protect" themselves from the public realm, by blocking access to the public, or by making access excessively expensive' (Kaika and Thielen, 2006, p. 63). It only needs to be added that the business of protecting themselves from the public domain, as outlined by these critics, involves these private buildings in a look outwards as well as inwards; but one that is, as I see it, visored. It entails seeing, in an intrusive sense, without being seen to do so.

In a class society, all buildings, but especially corporate or state-sponsored buildings, are effectively in a state of siege, however innocent or hospitable they purport to be – not only in relation to the environment but to people. Zaera Polo, discussing 'an increase in the complexity of the *faciality* of buildings', argues that power, corporate capitalist power for example, however abstracted it has become, is still necessarily inscribed in buildings: 'the building envelope will still be required to

fulfill a complex set of performances, as the primary regulator between public and private, inside and outside' (Zaera Polo, 2008, p. 80). The façades of all buildings are engaged in the irreducibly political business of negotiating social antagonisms; that is to say, of reinforcing them as well as neutralizing or attempting to resolve them. In the contemporary metropolis, so-called iconic buildings, in spite of their implicit claims to transcend the politics of the urban environment, as their often infantilizing nicknames indicate, are profoundly and problematically invested in the reordering of urban space along these lines, as a substantial secondary literature testifies (see, for example, Sklair, 2006).

Every building must be able at the same time both to admit and to reject those that approach it. Every building must be able to assimilate some people and to intimidate and dissimilate others. To give a simple example, numerous buildings, including many hotels and shops, will either overtly or covertly embrace the economically and socially privileged and block access to the under-privileged. All buildings, through their form as well as their social function, privilege one sort of person over another. The façade of every building, to put it in Althusserian terms, interpellates the individual subjects that encounter it, hailing some and ignoring or deterring others. Every building watches us without being seen to do so. The underpaid private security guards that police so many buildings both in the daytime and the night, as well as the CCTV cameras with which their facades bristle, are in this respect only emblems of the hidden logic of all urban architecture.

Every building is visored. But if every façade is a visor then sometimes buildings exhibit this fact with particular clarity. As I've intimated, in this article I have in mind visored buildings in a concrete sense as well as an abstract one, an explicit sense as well as an implicit one. Visored buildings are those that, almost spitefully refusing the paradigm of transparency central to modernist architecture, level their gaze at us through shutters or slats that make it impossible for us to see into their interior. In this way, through windows that are not windows, they objectify the subject, forcing him or her to internalize a sense of being observed, watched; to live with a feeling of not being at home. Of course, there is always a rationale for these designs, often an admirably benign one, based on the materials and aesthetics of these buildings, and on the climatic and cultural conditions prevailing locally. In hot countries, for instance, slatted or screened façades can of course be efficient mechanisms for controlling heat and light. But I am interested, from a phenomenological point of view, in the politics encrypted in these exteriors and their surrounding spaces. For the concrete appurtenances or attributes of the architectural visor exemplify what Paul Jones has described as 'the role of architecture in providing the material symbols connected to capital accumulation' (Jones, 2009, p. 2525).

I am interested in the uncanny effects of the visor. Let me very briefly give some examples – both from outside the UK and, more particularly, from London – in the shape of a far from comprehensive dioramic sketch. In tracking from Europe to Britain, I will gradually tighten my focus on the form and ideology of these visored buildings. Perhaps the grandest and most monumental of them is the Onassis Cultural Centre in Athens, by the French practice Architecture Studio, a vast, rather impressive rectangular block that veils its exterior with marble bands. More open, more porous in relation to its immediate urban surroundings, is the façade of concrete blocks and slatted metal blinds which comprises the elevation of the 906 School in Sabadell, outside Barcelona, designed by H-Arquitectes. Less interesting, and far more aggressive in its use of the visor effect, as seems appropriate for a building with an explicitly commercial as opposed to educational function, is the headquarters of

Banca Sella in Biella, Italy, which uses the terracotta colour of the slats in order to mitigate its intrusive, high-rise intervention in the local area.

Figure 1: Grimshaw, UCL Roberts Building, London

In London, the same terracotta effect is used for the slatted front extension to the University College London Engineering Building, which I have to pass every morning in order to enter my office opposite Malet Street in Bloomsbury. It is designed by Grimshaw, whose website boasts that this ‘distinctive outward-looking façade’ is their response to a brief which prioritized the need for ‘a striking public face for the university’. The façade is ‘outward-looking’, though, only in the sense that a visor, surmounted by a grille, is ‘outward-looking’. It creates the impression of closedness rather than openness. The effect is of a private rather than public face for what Grimshaw describes as ‘the university’s renowned Centre for Enterprise and Management in Industry’. Here, the language of faciality seems especially hypocritical. It is indeed noticeable that, like both this university facility and the Onassis Cultural Centre, several of the buildings that deploy these visored facades occupy the borderland between private and public architecture.

Figure 2: Rogers Stirk Harbour, World Conservations and Exhibitions Centre, London

At the opposite end of Malet Street from the UCL Engineering Building, to take another example, the discreet new extension to the British Museum is visible. Designed by Rogers Stirk Harbour and Partners, the World Conservations and Exhibitions Centre, as it is named, has been slid like the flat side of a blade between two wings of the original building. There, with cool, clinical precision, it plunges twenty metres below ground. From the back of the British Museum, where it is sited, only one of its four modular pavilions is visible, and the effect of its silver-grey façade – which Rowan Moore evocatively characterizes in terms of ‘slats of milky cast glass and pale stone’ (Moore, 2014) – is oddly secretive for a public building. Perhaps this is no accident. Richard Rogers’s partner Graham Stirk, who built ‘the luxury residential fortresses of One Hyde Park, Neo Bankside and Riverlight in Nine Elms’, led the design for the British Museum extension, and it ‘shares these projects’ ruthless efficiency and slick finish’, as Oliver Wainwright astutely commented in a piece for the *Guardian* when it was unveiled in 2014 (Wainwright, 2014). In short, this is a private-sector aesthetic, consonant with the ascendancy in London of a culture dominated by the super-rich, one that is inclined to conceal and sequester its accumulated wealth, whether this consists in financial or cultural capital. In place of the aesthetic of transparency with which modernist architecture signalled its commitment to a democratic politics, buildings like the British Museum extension, in spite of their provenance in the public sector, institute an aesthetic of opacity consistent with a metropolis in which real power, even in a parliamentary context, is increasingly undemocratic in its structures, increasingly susceptible to the private sector.

Figure 3: Foster and Partners, City Hall, London

City Hall, the distinctive building which houses the Greater London Authority, on the British capital’s Southbank, is even more exemplary in this respect. For, in

spite of the fact that it is the official headquarters of a publically elected body, namely the London Assembly, this building and the land on which it stands is privately owned. In 2013, its original owners, More London, sold a thirteen-acre stretch of the Southbank to a Kuwaiti property company called St Martins in an enormously lucrative, and secretive, deal. Today, St Martins rents the land to the city's Mayor and the various businesses that occupy the surrounding office blocks. More London Estates Management, which continues to co-ordinate and control this 'privately owned public space' (POPS), has not only installed an extensive CCTV and security personnel system but banned numerous vital urban activities, including begging, busking, demonstrating, loitering and skateboarding. City Hall itself, which was opened in 2002, exhibits the characteristic logic of visored architecture. Designed by Foster and Partners, which claims on its website, without irony, that City Hall expresses 'the transparency and accessibility of the democratic process', the building resembles nothing so much as an armoured helmet. If its aesthetic has something of the space age about it, because it evokes an astronaut's helmet, it also has something of the Middle Ages about it, for its form recalls, for example, the rounded skull of a visored bascinet from the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries. Like these helmets, it secretes an invisible and almost existentially disquieting gaze. City Hall thus hides in plain sight its hostility to the transparency and accessibility both of public space and the democratic process.

What is the phenomenological effect of these visored buildings? It is, I think, to feel unsettled by the presence of an alien gaze. Here, we can return to Derrida's discussion of 'hauntology', and in particular the metaphor he devises for his reading of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – the metaphor of the visor. In the opening pages of *Specters of Marx*, Derrida explores the disconcerting effect that Hamlet's late father's spectral presence has, at the start of the play, on Horatio, Marcellus and the hero himself. It will be recalled that in the first scene of the play the ghost of old Hamlet assumes a 'warlike form'. He is a 'portentous figure' that 'comes armèd through [the] watch' (Shakespeare, 1980, p. 67). 'A figure like your father, / Armèd at point exactly, cap-a-pe,' Horatio tells Hamlet in the third scene of the play, has been stalking the battlements, wearing its beaver, the lower part of the helmet's face guard, raised (Shakespeare, 1980, p. 77). It is this image that Derrida (who is reliant on a French translation by the late Yves Bonnefoy) reconfigures as a visor.

Derrida's interpretation of the gaze of the armed apparition – which he identifies, interestingly, as a Thing – is uncanny: 'This Thing meanwhile looks at us and sees us not see it even when it is there. A spectral asymmetry interrupts here all specularity.' 'We will call this the *visor effect*,' he states: 'we do not see who looks at us' (Derrida, 1994, pp. 6-7). This 'visor effect', he further explains, evokes a protective helmet into which 'slits are cut' so as to permit Hamlet's father 'to see without being seen':

For the helmet effect, it suffices that a visor be *possible* and that one play with it. Even when it is raised, *in fact*, its possibility continues to signify that someone, beneath the armor, can safely see without being seen or without being identified. Even when it is raised, the visor remains, an available resource and structure, solid and stable as armor, the armor that covers the body from head to foot, the armor of which it is a part and to which it is attached. This is what distinguishes a visor from the mask with which, nevertheless, it shares this incomparable power, perhaps the supreme insignia of power: the power to see without being seen. (Derrida, 1994, p. 8)

The visor-effect is what makes us ‘feel ourselves seen by a look which it will always be impossible to cross’. ‘This spectral *someone other looks at us*,’ Derrida concludes, italicizing his reference to the other in order to reinforce its uncanny associations; ‘we feel ourselves being looked at by it’ (Derrida, 1994, p. 7).

This sense of uncanniness, of feeling ourselves seen by a look that it is impossible to cross, to counteract or to cancel out, not least because it cannot be directly returned or reciprocated, embodied as it is in the building-as-Thing, this sense of uncanniness is structural to the phenomenological effect of the visored buildings I have identified. For them, the visor functions as ‘an available resource and structure, solid and stable as armor,’ which instigates, and in an everyday context ceaselessly enacts, the supreme form of power, ‘the power to see without being seen’. In this respect, visored buildings paradoxically display precisely the relations of power that secretly obtain in all buildings, which might be characterized in terms of what Derrida calls ‘a spectral asymmetry’ that interrupts ‘all specularity’. In arming their gaze, and thus ensuring that it cannot be returned, mirrored, reflected back, they reveal that every façade inscribes an aggressive, offensive orientation to those that inhabit its immediate environment. The mask does not hide the face, it *is* the face,’ Deleuze and Guattari write in their discussion of ‘faciality’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004, p. 127). The visor does not hide the face, it *is* the face; but it encodes the gaze.

The visored building thus constitutes an insignia, to use Derrida’s term, for the disposition of power in the contemporary metropolis. Its armed gaze is symptomatic of the developments that have for some time been taking place in metropolitan cities such as London, where spaces are not only increasingly privatized but shaped at all levels by the technological apparatus of a surveillance system deployed to consolidate, police and reinforce this relentless process of privatization. It is also symptomatic, perhaps, of an architectural practice that, especially in an urban environment infiltrated and ultimately dominated by the corporate sphere, is currently being reshaped by ‘the increasing facelessness of the client’ (Zaera Polo, 2008, p. 79). The visored building – profoundly implicated in what Mike Davis once called ‘the archisemiotics of class war’ (Davis, 1990, p. 231) – thus exhibits the architectural logic of contemporary capitalism. It is a monumental but at the same time everyday embodiment of an urban society that, in both its state and corporate forms, interpellates people as atomized individuals subject to an insidious system of surveillance.

IV. Conclusion

We are not at home in the streets of our cities. How then do we respond to this situation? I propose that, dystopian as this scenario might sound, we adopt our own masks, our own visors. Only in this way, as inhabitants of cities who are committed to a culture of openness and transparency, to the notion of public space, can we neutralize the uncanny gaze inscribed in an architecture that is persistently private, secretive, subtly intimidating.

Simmel, with typical perspicacity, grasped the significance of this homeopathic logic in his seminal essay on the ‘Sociology of the Senses’ in 1907. There, exploring the power relationship that is inscribed in the interaction between people’s eyes, the intersection of their looks, he recognizes that when one’s eyes are seen by other eyes, not least in the context of urban life, one is known, and one is therefore disempowered. This can be avoided, though, or at least mitigated – in the

interests of what he had called, in 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', 'self-preservation in the face of the large city' – if one withdraws one's gaze, if one screens one's eyes. 'Lowering my gaze,' he argues, 'deprives the other of the possibility of finding out about me.' Simmel characterizes this defensive response, which he insists has 'an actual practicality in this directly sensory and sociological relationship', as the 'ostrich tactic'; and he concludes that 'whoever does not look at the other party really does remove him or herself to a certain extent from being seen' (Simmel, 1997, p. 112).

The Occupy movement, with its propensity for appropriating the distinctive Guy Fawkes masks that featured in the film adaptation of David Lloyd and Alan Moore's graphic novel *V for Vendetta* (1988) in 2005, has been pioneering in this respect (even if it has also, inadvertently, lined the pockets of Time Warner, the corporation that owns the copyright). For it has developed an affordable, uniform device that, rendering the activist resistant to 'being seen', and therefore evading state surveillance, neatly but also theatrically deploys or implements the ostrich tactic. Perhaps these masks should not be reserved merely for protests against finance capital but worn as an everyday uniform, as a form of protective armour, in the dwindling public spaces we traverse in our cities.

But perhaps the so-called 'hoodie', the hooded top, a ubiquitous presence on contemporary city streets, not least because it provides partial shelter from the intrusive gaze of CCTV cameras, already functions as this everyday uniform. The fact that, like other security companies, More London Estates Management has banned hoodies from the stretch of the Southbank that it polices points to precisely this. Certainly, on urban protests and demonstrations, at least since those against the World Trade Organization in Seattle in 1999, hoods have functioned, in practical terms, as a means of eluding the more primitive systems of surveillance, and, in symbolic terms, as a reciprocal response to the armoured and visored helmets adopted by a more or less militarized urban police force.

'Who are those hooded hordes?' T.S. Eliot demands in 'What the Thunder Said', the final section of *The Waste Land* (1922), as he invokes apocalyptic images of 'cracks and reforms' that burst in 'the violet air', and of 'falling towers': 'Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London / Unreal' (Eliot, 1969, p. 73). Let us collectively embrace our identity as hooded hordes among the plains, mazes and chasms of cement and glass and steel and stone that structure the metropolitan cities we inhabit in the twenty-first century. In this way, by blocking and reversing its gaze, we might at least refuse, if not cancel out, the coercive logic of the visored building. Here, in other words, is the germ of a politics of the visor we can use to resist the politics of the visor.

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