



## The Work of the Forest

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In Walter Benjamin's unpublished masterpiece *Passagen-Werk* (an interrogation of nineteenth-century Paris), he attempted to create "a dialectics of seeing" where it is the interpretative power of images that makes his conceptual points concrete, with reference to the larger world outside the texts and images.<sup>1</sup> In his methodology, it is the juxtaposition of text and image over time that elucidates a historical truth. In devising this method Benjamin was interested in the ways in which allegorical techniques of the Baroque period might be revived in the form of dialectical images: images which, like the Baroque emblems, could be "read".

As Susan Buck-Morss writes, "The Baroque dramas were melancholy reflections on the inevitability of decay and disintegration. In the *Passagen-Werk* the devaluation of (new) nature and its status as 'ruin' become instructive

politically. The debris of industrial culture teaches us not the necessity of submitting to historical catastrophe, but the fragility of the social order that tells us that this catastrophe is necessary. The crumbling of the monuments that were built to signify the immortality of civilization become proof, rather, of its transiency."<sup>2</sup>

In tying an allegorical tradition to montage theory, Benjamin was attempting to create a sense of history that could come to terms with technology and the shifting categories of what might be taken as nature (or the recent past of nature – representations that civilization had made seem natural). This was a philosophical and not a literary undertaking, for it shows the ways in which history is subjected to the ideological underpinnings of the material world.

Significantly, it is the bourgeois interior that plays a crucial

1. Paraphrase of Benjamin taken from Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1989, p. 117.

2. Ibid, p. 170.

role as a “dialectical image” in which the reality of industrial capitalism is manifested visibly. “The ‘dialectical image’ has as many levels of logic as the Hegelian concept. It is a way of seeing that crystallizes antithetical elements by providing axes for their alignment....Benjamin charts philosophical ideas visually within an unreconciled and transitory field of oppositions that can perhaps best be pictured in terms of coordinates of contradictory terms, the ‘synthesis’ of at which their axes intersect.”<sup>3</sup>

And at the apex of this axis is the commodity, the imprint of objects particularly visible in plush bourgeois interiors: “the fetish” as the keyword of the commodity, as mythic phantasmagoria, an arrested form of history.

“It conforms to the reified form of new nature condemned to the modern Hell of the new as always the same (fashion). But this fetishized phantasmagoria is also the form in which the human, socialist potential of industrial nature lies frozen, awaiting the collective political action that could awaken it.”<sup>4</sup>

And it is in the “ruin” that the wish-images of the past century appear, as rubble, in the present moment as unfulfilled dreams.

Can the documentary tradition, so overworked by television media be re-articulated through a “dialectics” of the unredeemable? And conversely, is it possible to create a visual construct in which montage can be re-situated outside the bounds of the televisual stereotypes? Is the notion of a radical montage theory at odds with the production of what I hoped would be an intervention within the straightforward celebration of Brussels’ most notable, and touristic, architectural style?

“I never thought of this Art Nouveau as a style with a name. No. I saw it as the New Art. An art liberated from, but also wedded to technology in the service of beauty, reviving the traditions of the past, reforming them for the present. What did I see?”

“Great iron buildings: fantastic interiors --- not for aristocrats, for everyone; rail travel, the engine of desire; Africa, civilized; woman, liberated buildings as monuments to a great art of expression and inner feeling. Culture and nature, the same. The whole world changed.”<sup>5</sup>

Art Nouveau took different forms in different cultures. It is important to understand that Art Nouveau in Belgium was utopian and implied a social transformation based on the integration of all the arts within daily life, as opposed, for example, to Art Nouveau in France where it was an aristocratic re-situation of the craft movement designed to protect French hegemony. Yet among the various manifestations of Art Nouveau in different European countries, there are common traits.

“I saw it as though I was dreaming. Perhaps I was, I don’t know. I wasn’t myself. You and I were waltzing, spinning in the room. When suddenly, the room became a forest. The chairs turned to trees. The floor, nature’s carpet. So green, the smell. For a moment I felt the most complete joy. But then the trees grew long branches. They encircled my body, not letting me go. I couldn’t escape. I thought I would suffocate.”<sup>6</sup>

One of these common traits might be characterized as the pursuit of interiority; the creation of a domestic space where fantasy and imagination could mingle freely with the world of the senses. Jean-Martin Charcot was working with hysterics in Paris; Sigmund Freud was beginning to treat patients in Vienna; nervous stimulation and work on the psyche were activities that were legitimated across a broad spectrum, including the collecting and writings of the Goncourt brothers, and the novels of Marcel Proust. In Proust’s “whirling room” at the beginning of *Swann’s Way*, the narrator no longer needs historical cues to provide an anecdotal frame (as was the case with the Goncourt Brothers’ recreation of eighteenth-century court life within the confines of their home) for visual projection. Instead, the tumult of mental energy generated by the inhabitant is enough to set the room spinning, trapping all in a centrifuge of the psyche. The “whirling room” functions as a metaphor which dissolves the body and the senses into domestic space.<sup>7</sup>

Theories about the psyche were assimilated by artists, in particular the Symbolists. Symbolism objectifies the subjective. The dream-state is life. In painting this can be seen clearly in the work of Gustav Klimt, where it is the body of the woman which seems to have merged or dissolved with the space around her.

New technologies eliminate differences among workers as all workers can now perform the same jobs. In terms of women, this depersonalization of gender differences connoted a loss of sexuality and produced the differences and as well as the disassociation so characteristic of the hysteric.

“Oh ecstasy: The body dissolving into the claustrophobia of domestic life. The home, a sanctuary capable of reproducing all the wonders of nature = opulence and ennui. The melancholy known to kings could be experienced by anyone. The body of woman all but useless as technological inventions render her free, yet without a place.”<sup>8</sup>

“Culture never progresses. It is only styles that change. History is stuck like a broken record in the present structure of social relations. The workers can’t afford to stop working any more than the classes that live off their labour can afford to let history go forward. So many revolutions, yet nothing has really changed.”<sup>9</sup>

3. Ibid, pp. 209-2 10.

4. Ibid, p. 211.

5. Anon, *Le Journal du Soir*, Paris, 12 October 1899

6. Charcot patient, quoted in Nelson Abrams, *Charcot’s Diary*, London, Samson Press, 1955, p. 78.

7. Marcel Proust, *Swann’s Way*, New York, Pantheon Press, 1978, p. 34.

8. Georges Valbert, “L’age des machines”, *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 93, 1889, p. 696

9. Buck-Morss, op. cit., p. 134.



Belgian Art Nouveau might be seen as a product of several forces: the creation of the Worker's Party in 1885 with its utopian leanings; the adoption of universal suffrage in 1892; the contribution of exiled French intellectuals fleeing the Commune of 1871; the vast personal wealth accrued by Leopold II through his control of the Belgian Congo. Many of the architects involved in Art Nouveau in Brussels, including Paul Hankar and Victor Horta, belonged to literary and artistic groups, such as the Group of XX, or the Cercle du Sillon. These groups were idealistically oriented and discussed the many ways that a new art might transform existing social orders.<sup>10</sup>

Architecture, as the culmination of all the arts, was particularly suited to effect this transformation as it could contain and unite all the arts under one discipline. Although this is similar to earlier arts and crafts movements in

other countries; in Belgium, there was no specific political agenda to be implemented. Rather, there was the vague longing for a transformation of all that was stultifying within bourgeois existence; but into what it would be transformed was left unknown. And certainly, this lack of a political program contributed to its easy assimilation as other styles supplanted it.

The architecture of Art Nouveau in Brussels is a startling reminder of the wealth of Brussels at the end of the nineteenth century. Preserved are numerous houses whose ornate individualism beckons from the narrow entrance ways that make up a homage to the single family dwelling; a place where idiosyncrasies can flourish and even be celebrated within an eminent domain. The Art Nouveau architects employed skylights and other light-well treatments in order to open up the narrow, deep plots that comprise a Brussels'

10. François Loyer and Paul Hankar, *Dix ans d'art nouveau: Ten Years of Art Nouveau*, C.F.C./A.A.M., Brussels, 1992, p. 31.

Both Horta and Hankar were involved peripherally in the Group of XX, made up of painters, writers, sculptors and musicians who held an annual salon. Magazines like *La Wollonie* were also important. The dissolution of the Group of XX in 1893 corresponds to the year that Art Nouveau was born. For in this year, the magazine *Libre Esthétique* came into existence, edited by Octave Maus, who believed that all art production should be unified under one form of art—the decorative arts could now be considered the same as painting and sculpture. In 1895 Gustave Serrurier Bovy undertook the organization of the exhibition *L'Ouvre Artistique* where over 600 works of art and architecture drawings were shown. Included in this show were many of the artists who came to represent the crystallization of the Art Nouveau style.

At this same time Horta and Hankar were members of the *Société Centrale des Architectes de Belgique* where they promoted Art Nouveau. However, they got into a fight with the more traditional members and were forced to resign. In 1894 Horta founded the Belgian branch of the *Société Populaire des Beaux Arts*, called *Coopérative Artistique*. With this organization Horta pursued his political ambitions, standing for local elections.





city lot. These expressive wood and tile treatments were meant to invest the interior with a sense of nature, bringing the outdoors inside. This relation to nature was not new; both earlier arts and crafts traditions and the Rococo had employed nature motifs. In the Rousseau-inspired tradition, nature was the equivalent of unadorned simplicity, whereas in Rococo nature motifs were taken to fantastic filigreed extremes.

In Brussels, it was the feel of nature, the sensation of nature that was desired, nature brought inside, not tamed, not domesticated. This was nature from another place, a wild, untamed place, not from the gentle rolling farmlands, but from an exotic landscape far away. This was an adventure, a nature to be explored. This was Africa. It cannot go unremarked that all of the countries that possess an Art Nouveau tradition were involved in the colonization of Africa.

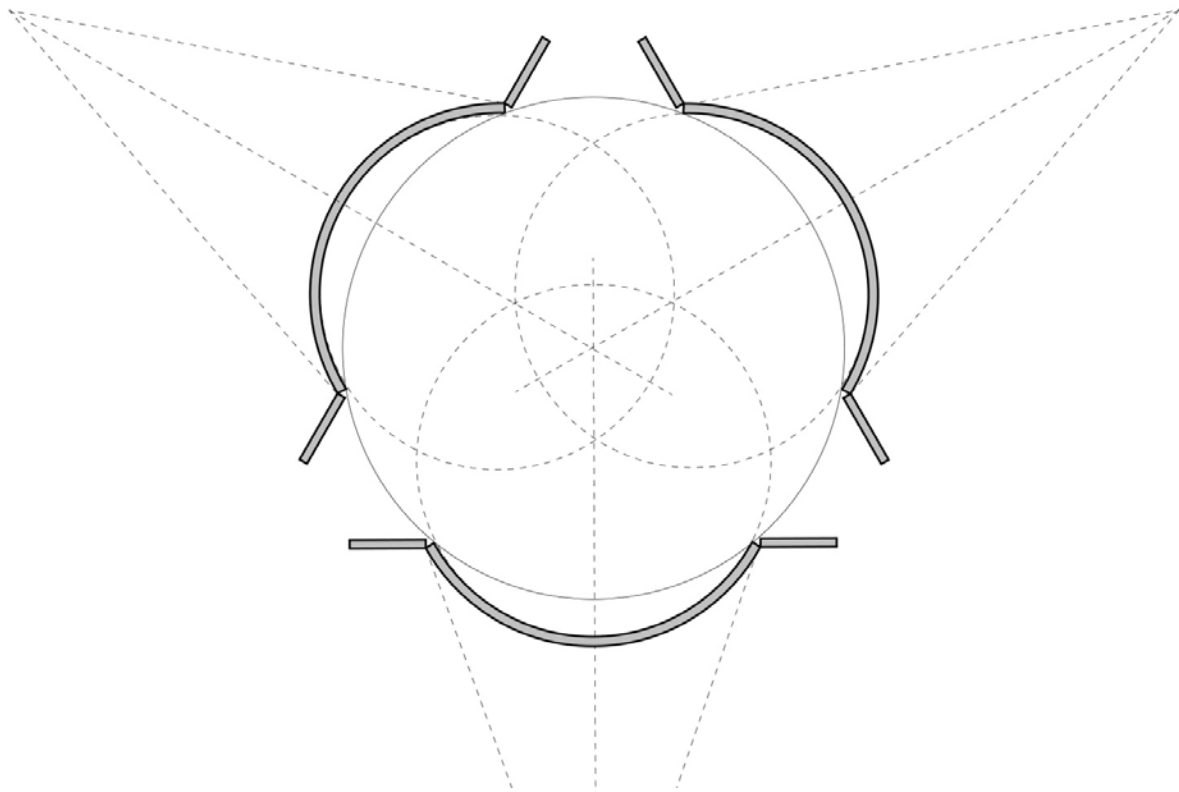
“Africa is smarter than the stereotypes – as primitive, as savage, as the dark continent – for it was able to keep white traders out until nearly the end of the nineteenth century.”<sup>11</sup>

In 1872 The New York Herald financed H.M. Stanley’s expedition to Africa to find Dr Livingston, the missionary and explorer in the “heart” of Africa. In 1878 Leopold II

hired Stanley as his chief minister in the Congo, a 900,000 square mile area equal to nearly one half the size of the United States. The colonization of Africa was one of the last attempts to completely legislate the wholesale civilization of indigenous cultures. During this same period the US was implementing its “manifest destiny”, which claimed all land as far as the (white) eye could see (and did not see that this land belonged to Native Americans). Stanley was actively involved in discovering how the natural resources of the Congo could best be exploited. In 1885 the General Act of the Berlin Conference gave Leopold II the right to develop “The Congo Free State” as his personal property. It was, in fact, the great wealth of the Congo that allowed for the luxurious building projects undertaken by Leopold during this time and which also produced many of the haute bourgeoisie homes, for Leopold encouraged Congo investment.

The most conspicuous effect of the Exposition Universelle of 1878 was to strengthen the idea of France’s colonial destiny in Africa. When the Musee Africain (1879) was founded, its sponsors hoped to convince the public of the continuity that they thought should exist between science and their applications in the conquest of new territories. During this era many of the sciences – zoology, botany, ethnography were conceived in part to provide better

11. Robert Farris Thompson, *The Flash of the Spirit*, New York, Vintage Books, p. 156.



information about the countries so that they could be colonized.<sup>12</sup>

"We wander all over the beautiful park Tervuren. Away from the noisy gallery of Machines – hissing, spitting, howling, roaring-to the Exposition Congo and its celebration of the new art, Art Nouveau. Life is Art. Here are the tools for social concord, more powerful, more beautiful than any other. Here is a living art that asks us to achieve what it does: total harmony with nature. And here is nature, so abundant, so bountiful, who could refuse. That is the wonder that Art can accomplish."<sup>13</sup>

In some ways colonization was seen as the antidote to slavery. The *Force Publique* knocked out the Muslim slave trade that was still flourishing in Central Africa in the 1890s. If we analyze some of the friezes shown in the Congo Exposition of 1897, we can see how colonization is opposed to slavery as a civilizing force. On the left side armed Arab men, in long dresses, take several black men presumably into slavery. On the right is a village scene. Several women sit behind baskets with their heads in their hands communicating an unspeakable grief. The display suggests that these poor people have no saving order in their lives. And that they are victimized by Arabs, who rape their women and sell their men into slavery. Compared to this how mild and benign is Belgium rule?<sup>14</sup>

These values were institutionalized by missionaries whose conversion of chieftains into Christians, forced them to give

up their wives and hence much of their wealth, dissolved the structure of tribal life into a model based on individualism; in a culture where individualism had as yet no place. But colonization was not an antidote to slavery. Work camps with forced indentured servitude separated families. Men and women wore collars that announced which camp they belonged to.

By far the worst abuses occurred during the period known as "the red rubber period" where the colonial army was allowed to pillage and massacre so as to "encourage" the natives to furnish rubber. Nearly 10 million people died during this period, and by 1908 Leopold II was convinced to cede the Congo Free State to Belgium where it became the Belgian Congo.

The structure of tribal life is exceedingly different from that of Western culture. Social relations proceed along indirect routes, and without hierarchical commands. Cultures are oral so storytelling and proverbs play an important role. If a man is more important than another man, and is asked a direct question by a less important man, and he doesn't know the answer, he will lose face. And, if he does know the answer, he will seem to know more than the more important man, and then the more important man will lose face. Therefore, it is best not to ask questions directly and social relations will stay intact.<sup>15</sup>

"I met a man in a bar recently. He was from Africa. We had a lot of drinks together, but when it came time to pay,

12. See, for example, Patricia Leighton, "The white peril and l'art negre", *The Art Bulletin*, 7214. New York, 1990, p. 613

13. Octave Uzanne, *L'art et Ud&*, Paris, 1899, pp. 12-13.

14. Patricia Leighton, op. cit., p. 620.

15. Conversation with Maurice Boiykasse, Brussels, October 1991.

he did not. He was not a criminal, he was just like those European explorers in Africa investigating native life, and caught without any local currency.”<sup>16</sup>

As early as the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris, African peoples were persuaded to inhabit “typical” dwellings on the exposition site. They agreed because they were promised a better life after the World’s Fair finished. Often they died from the cold and from diseases whose names they did not know. Survivors were placed in the zoos, permanently on display.<sup>17</sup>

Leopold II had a fantasy about African life. He constructed the Laeken greenhouses to mimic the Congo as a kind of idealized garden, a fantastic version of African life. And it is here that he lived with her, a sixteen-year-old Parisian girl, who came to be known as Baroness Blanche de Vaughan. She bore him two sons. And it was here that he spent the last days of his life. He began Laeken in 1874. It took nearly 20 years to complete. By about 1890 Leopold II realized that he needed much more investment capital to produce the infrastructure necessary to develop the Congo. In many ways the Congo Exposition might be seen as the fulfilment of his fantasies about the Congo. As in its idealized representations of Congo life, it attempted to sell Belgium businessmen on the idea of investing capital in Congo.

The above is one history of the Congo that is well known. But in art we have another history and that is the remarkable hold that African objects possess over the art world—from the mid-1880s when objects first appeared in the Musée de l’Homme in Paris and were reproduced in magazines like *L’Illustration*, until the 1950s. How could we value the art and objects that were produced by African cultures and not value the culture of its peoples? This could happen because, on the level of representation, African peoples never enjoyed any status other than that of a commodity. The German naturalist Georg Schweinfurth did much to promote the idea that in the interior of Africa, free from Christian and Muslim influences, there existed societies with a high level of culture – these included the Zande, Congo and Mangbetu tribes. Many of the objects gathered on his and other scientists’ journeys through Africa found their way into the Musée Africain and were also published in *Le Tour de Monde*, a leading magazine of the day. And although there is no direct evidence that the architects associated with Art Nouveau collected African objects, it is quite probable that they would have seen some of them either in some of the museums or in magazines. Leopold II had given explicit instructions that artifacts should be collected by his ministers. These objects seem to have been stored in the Royal quarters until the Congo Exposition, but they were certainly known by the architects as they began to prepare the exhibition in 1893.

In Spring 1991, *Noir et blanc*, an exhibition curated by the Dutch sociologist Felix de Rooy, opened in Brussels. In room after room, the devastating history of white representations of African peoples was on view. Beginning

with early skeletal studies and slavery ads, and continuing up through colonization and, later, commodification of African images as products, *Noir et blanc* gives a voice to a repressed past, allowing us to both examine what has been repressed and how this repression has been represented. And then there is the Terverun Museum itself. It has one of the finest collections of Belgian Congo objects.

Here are artifacts from over 100 indigenous peoples. And here you can see, in the many curvilinear forms, the power of African art and artifacts. Unfortunately, Art Nouveau took the formal elements of African cultures without understanding the culture. In borrowing the form of so-called “African” art (Africa is a Western name), Art Nouveau merely reduced what was powerful within African culture to a style. Had they understood that what produced that power was a different attitude to daily life, perhaps their borrowing would have been able to go beyond appropriation and into a critique of the problems at the heart of the bourgeois family.

It is ironic that Art Nouveau, which more than any other recent architectural invention glorified individual space, borrowed many of its forms from cultures that had no concept of private space. If you look at the section in the Terverun Museum on colonialism you will see preserved in cases sculptures made by African peoples after their first contact with white traders. Here you see white people represented as gods.

Objects from the Terverun cannot be re-appropriated. There is no original culture to return them to, although this is not to say that these objects should take their rightful place as part of their original cultural heritage. When cultures are destroyed, their objects become place markers. And as Freud and the Surrealists wrote, it is a property of objects to take on the characteristics of their owners, so is it any wonder when they take their revenge?

I chose the metaphor of the “whirling room” of Marcel Proust as the basic structuring device of *The Work of the Forest* because within the endless surround of a continuous panning shot, I could montage images from the conflicting histories of the colonization of Africa and the Art Nouveau period. These are histories that the spectator can construct from different vantage points as she or he sees the images and listens to the different and competing narratives.

Three large screens, made to fit around a circle with three openings allowing passage to the centre of the circle, comprise the projection area of *The Work of the Forest*. The screen design, based on an Art Nouveau motif, is transparent and can be viewed from several vantage points. The installation projects three synchronized videotapes that show a continuous panorama. For instance, Section 1, set into the ruin of an Art Nouveau house, is a series of ghostly images that come to light as the camera moves. These are historical moments that refer to the history of the relationship between the colonialization of Africa and fin-de-siècle life, especially the place of women in domestic

16. Alfred Jarry, “Ubu Colonial”, *Almanach illustri du Pere Ubu*, Paris, 1901, p. 562.

17. Johannes Paudrat, “From Africa”, in W. Rubin, ed., *Primitivism in 20th Century Art*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1984, p. 145.



space. As the montage elements reappear on the different screens, the viewer hears another sound track, conveying a different history. In this way the spectator can pick and choose among different histories and stories, taking up a variety of subject positions, (points of views).

Each section of the work corresponds to a particular set of issues. For example, Section 2, set in the Stanley Archive, explores the relationships between explorers, traders, and missionaries.

Section 3, in an Art Nouveau house, concerns the myths of cannibalism and the commodification of African peoples by Europeans. Section 4 contrasts two gardens; the garden Leopold II built for himself to replicate the paradise of Africa, and the garden at the 1897 Congo Exposition where African peoples, living "in situ", died as they portrayed this non- paradise.

Section 5 returns to the ruined house, this time running the montage elements in reverse order to show the impossibility of returning to an earlier time, historically.

Section 6 continues this idea and explores the notion that even with the release of the objects, without a fundamental social transformation that would reorder relations among classes, that history is doomed to forever repeat itself.

The structure of this work was built around the idea of activating the space by means of a "dialectics of seeing". In this sense, presenting several different subject positions, points of view, for the observer to inhabit.

Looked at from the balcony or from the side entrances, your eye sees the entire work. This view provides the comfort and authority that is most closely associated with monocular perspective and classical Hollywood cinema. You are in control of the narrative and can choose how you will identify with it. Conversely, the view from the centre of the panorama is the most disorienting. It is only possible to see two of the screens at one time, so you are never in control of what you are seeing, and the panorama itself disrupts your sense of closure.

It is also from this view that you discover that each screen possesses a different sound track, hence the meaning of the images changes. The third view is available by walking around the exterior circumference of the panorama. As the screens are transparent, you can seem to predict the movement sequences as well as it seems you are able to keep slightly ahead of the action. And, it is from this vantage point you can best deconstruct how the different and competing montage elements produce their meanings.

The above is an edited version of Judith Barry's contribution to the catalogue for Judith Barry's installation video, *The Work of the Forest*, Fondation pour l'Architecture, Brussels, 15 February - 8 March 1992.

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