THE MASS ORNAMENT
WEIMAR ESSAYS

SIEGFRIED KRAKAUER

Translated, Edited, and with an Introduction by
Thomas Y. Levin

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Analysis of a City Map

Faubourgs and the Center

Some of the Parisian faubourgs are giant shelters for all sorts of ordinary people, from low-level functionaries down to the workers, the tradespeople, and those who are called losers because others consider themselves winners. The way in which they have cohabited over the centuries is expressed in the form of these shelters, which is certainly not bourgeois but is not proletarian either, to the extent that the latter term evokes smokestacks, tenements, and highways. It is impoverished and humane at the same time. This humaneness results not only from the fact that existence in the faubourgs contains remnants of a natural life which give this existence some fulfillment. What is much more decisive is that this replete existence is slated for demolition.

On Saturday afternoons the avenue St. Ouan is a fairground. Not that the fair simply set itself up here like a traveling circus; rather, the avenue was pregnant with it and brings forth the fair from within itself. The need to lay in supplies for Sunday brings together a crowd that would appear to astronomers as nebulae. It jams together into dense clumps in which the tightly packed individuals wait, until at some point they are again unpacked. Between purchases they savor the spectacle of the constant disintegration of the complexes to which they belong, a sight that keeps them at the peripheries of life.

Were the Mediterranean lapping at the avenue’s edges, the shops
could hardly expose themselves in a more windowless fashion. They discharge a stream of commodities that serves to satisfy creaturely needs; it climbs up the façades, is interrupted at street level, and then shoots with redoubled force up into the heights on the far side of the crosscurrent of passersby. Above the uncleared undergrowth of natural products which will later enliven the menu as hors d’oeuvres, the primeval forests of meat shanks are swaying their treetops. Next door the supply of household goods runs wild, with covers made of burlap on which a charming flora scatters flowers across everyday life.

Necessity brings objects into the sphere of human warmth. Out of the organic thicket of the grocery sections arises an apparatus made of glass and metal whose sharp sting could have been born only from an appetite for inflicting torture. Its gleam gives one the impression that the instrument would, just for the fun of it, be capable of stabbing the flourishing array of butchered meat, fish, and mussel ragouts in whose midst it has ensconced itself. It is an oil-dispensing apparatus which allows easily digestible yellow portions to drip out of its glass stomach into the customers’ small receptacles. The needy character of the environment has put it in a friendly mood and has transformed a mechanical bee into a harmless house goblin that takes care of preparing the meals and is good to the children.

Although the fairground recalls a department-store catalogue in all its cosmic completeness, it is nevertheless only the popular edition of the big world. Whatever is on hand is limited and modest and somewhat vague, like bad photographs. It is no accident that the revolutions were spawned in the faubourgs. They are lacking in good fortune, in sensory splendor.

This splendor spreads out over the upper world of the boulevards in the city center. The crowds here are different from those further out. Neither a purpose nor the hour compels them to circulate; they trickle about timeless. The palaces that have become darkened over time and continue to exist as images can hardly master the swarms of people and cars any longer through the power of their delicate proportions. No one invented the plan according to which the elements of the hustle and bustle scribble a jumble of lines into the asphalt. There is no such plan. The goals are locked in the individual little particles, and the law of least resistance gives the curves their direction.

Behind mirrored panes, necessary objects mix with superfluous ones, which would be more necessary if they didn’t pour forth so abundantly. People of every class are free to lose themselves for entire afternoons, contemplating the jewelry, furs, and evening attire whose unambiguous magnificence beckons promisingly at the end of dime novels. The fact that one can estimate their cost makes such material objects even more unapproachable than they were before. Their spatial contiguity demands that one visit shop after shop to buy objects of every sort for the purpose of maintaining an inventory. But anyone whom they might have would be the last to possess them.

As dusk begins to fall, the lights go on at eye level. Undejectable like the little balls on an abacus, the arc lamps prowl through the labyrinth of flaming arrows and Bengalese oscillations. In the centers of night life the illumination is so harsh that one has to hold one’s hands over one’s ears. Meanwhile the lights have gathered for their own pleasure, instead of shining for man. Their glowing traces want to illuminate the night but succeed only in chasing it away. Their advertisements sink into the mind without allowing one to decipher them. The reddish gleam that lingers settles like a cloak over one’s thoughts.

Out of the hubbub rise the newspaper kiosks, tiny temples in which the publications of the entire world get together for a rendezvous. Foes in real life, they lie here in printed form side by side; the harmony could not be greater. Wherever Yiddish papers supported by Arabic texts come into contact with large headlines in Polish, peace is assured. But, alas, these newspapers do not know one another. Each copy is folded in on itself and is content to read its own columns. Regardless of the close physical relations that the papers cultivate, their news is so completely lacking in any contact that they are uninformed about one another. In the interstices the demon of absentmindedness reigns supreme.

Paris is not the only place where this holds true. All the cosmo-
politan centers that are also sites of splendor are becoming more and more alike. Their differences are disappearing.

Wide streets lead from the faubourgs into the splendor of the center. But this is not the intended center. The good fortune in store for the poverty further out is reached by radii other than the extant ones. Nevertheless, the streets that lead to the center must be traveled, for its emptiness today is real.
The Mass Ornament

The lines of life are various; they diverge and cease
Like footpaths and the mountains' utmost ends.
What we are here, elsewhere a God amends
With harmonies, eternal recompense, and peace.
—Hölderlin, "To Zimmer"

1

The position that an epoch occupies in the historical process can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions than from that epoch's judgments about itself. Since these judgments are expressions of the tendencies of a particular era, they do not offer conclusive testimony about its overall constitution. The surface-level expressions, however, by virtue of their unconscious nature, provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things. Conversely, knowledge of this state of things depends on the interpretation of these surface-level expressions. The fundamental substance of an epoch and its unheeded impulses illuminate each other reciprocally.

2

In the domain of body culture, which also covers the illustrated newspapers, tastes have been quietly changing. The process began with the Tiller Girls. These products of American distraction factories are no
longer individual girls, but indissoluble girl clusters whose movements are demonstrations of mathematics. As they condense into figures in the revues, performances of the same geometric precision are taking place in what is always the same packed stadium, be it in Australia or India, not to mention America. The tiniest village, which they have not yet reached, learns about them through the weekly newsreels. One need only glance at the screen to learn that the ornaments are composed of thousands of bodies, sexless bodies in bathing suits. The regularity of their patterns is cheered by the masses, themselves arranged by the stands in tier upon ordered tier.

These extravagant spectacles, which are staged by many sorts of people and not just girls and stadium crowds, have long since become an established form. They have gained international stature and are the focus of aesthetic interest.

The bearer of the ornaments is the mass and not the people [Volk], for whenever the people form figures, the latter do not hover in midair but arise out of a community. A current of organic life surges from these communal groups—which share a common destiny—to their ornaments, endowing these ornaments with a magic force and burdening them with meaning to such an extent that they cannot be reduced to a pure assemblage of lines. Those who have withdrawn from the community and consider themselves to be unique personalities with their own individual souls also fail when it comes to forming these new patterns. Were they to take part in such a performance, the ornament would not transcend them. It would be a colorful composition that could not be worked out to its logical conclusion, since its points—like the prongs of a rake—would be implanted in the soul’s intermediate strata, of which a residue would survive. The patterns seen in the stadiums and cabarets betray no such origins. They are composed of elements that are mere building blocks and nothing more. The construction of the edifice depends on the size of the stones and their number. It is the mass that is employed here. Only as parts of a mass, not as individuals who believe themselves to be formed from within, do people become fractions of a figure.

The ornament is an end in itself. Ballet likewise used to yield ornaments, which arose in kaleidoscopic fashion. But even after discarding their ritual meaning, these remained the plastic expression of erotic life, an erotic life that both gave rise to them and determined their traits. The mass movements of the girls, by contrast, take place in a vacuum; they are a linear system that no longer has any erotic meaning but at best points to the locus of the erotic. Moreover, the meaning of the living star formations in the stadiums is not that of military exercises. No matter how regular the latter may turn out to be, that regularity was considered a means to an end: the parade march arose out of patriotic feelings and in turn aroused them in soldiers and subjects. The star formations, however, have no meaning beyond themselves, and the masses above whom they rise are not a moral unit like a company of soldiers. One cannot even describe the figures as the decorative frills of gymnastic discipline. Rather, the girl-units drill in order to produce an immense number of parallel lines, the goal being to train the broadest mass of people in order to create a pattern of undreamed-of dimensions. The end result is the ornament, whose closure is brought about by emptying all the substantial constructs of their contents.

Although the masses give rise to the ornament, they are not involved in thinking it through. As linear as it may be, there is no line that extends from the small sections of the mass to the entire figure. The ornament resembles aerial photographs of landscapes and cities in that it does not emerge out of the interior of the given conditions, but rather appears above them. Actors likewise never grasp the stage setting in its totality, yet they consciously take part in its construction; and even in the case of ballet dancers, the figure is still subject to the influence of its performers. The more the coherence of the figure is relinquished in favor of mere linearity, the more distant it becomes from the immanent consciousness of those constituting it. Yet this does not lead to its being scrutinized by a more incisive gaze. In fact, nobody would notice the figure at all if the crowd of spectators, who have an aesthetic relation to the ornament and do not represent anyone, were not sitting in front of it.

The ornament, detached from its bearers, must be understood rationally. It consists of lines and circles like those found in textbooks on Euclidean geometry, and also incorporates the elementary components of
physics, such as waves and spirals. Both the proliferations of organic forms and the emanations of spiritual life remain excluded. The Tiller Girls can no longer be reassembled into human beings after the fact. Their mass gymnastics are never performed by the fully preserved bodies, whose contortions defy rational understanding. Arms, thighs, and other segments are the smallest component parts of the composition.

The structure of the mass ornament reflects that of the entire contemporary situation. Since the principle of the capitalist production process does not arise purely out of nature, it must destroy the natural organisms that it regards either as means or as resistance. Community and personality perish when what is demanded is calculability; it is only as a tiny piece of the mass that the individual can clamber up charts and can service machines without any friction. A system oblivious to differences in form leads on its own to the blurring of national characteristics and to the production of worker masses that can be employed equally well at any point on the globe.—Like the mass ornament, the capitalist production process is an end in itself. The commodities that it spews forth are not actually produced to be possessed; rather, they are made for the sake of a profit that knows no limit. Its growth is tied to that of business. The producer does not labor for private gains whose benefits he can enjoy only to a limited extent (in America surplus profits are directed to spiritual shelters such as libraries and universities, which cultivate intellectuals whose later endeavors repay with interest the previously advanced capitalist). No: the producer labors in order to expand the business. Value is not produced for the sake of value. Though labor may well have once served to produce and consume values up to a certain point, these have now become side effects in the service of the production process. The activities subsumed by that process have divested themselves of their substantial contents.—The production process runs its secret course in public. Everyone does his or her task on the conveyor belt, performing a partial function without grasping the totality. Like the pattern in the stadium, the organization stands above the masses, a monstrous figure whose creator withdraws it from the eyes of its bearers, and barely even observes it himself.—It is conceived according to rational principles which the Taylor system merely pushes to their ultimate conclusion. The hands in the factory correspond to the legs of the Tiller Girls. Going beyond manual capacities, psychotechnical aptitude tests attempt to calculate dispositions of the soul as well. The mass ornament is the aesthetic reflex of the rationality to which the prevailing economic system aspires.

Educated people—who are never entirely absent—have taken offense at the emergence of the Tiller Girls and the stadium images. They judge anything that entertains the crowd to be a distraction of that crowd. But despite what they think, the aesthetic pleasure gained from ornamental mass movements is legitimate. Such movements are in fact among the rare creations of the age that bestow form upon a given material. The masses organized in these movements come from offices and factories; the formal principle according to which they are molded determines them in reality as well. When significant components of reality become invisible in our world, art must make do with what is left, for an aesthetic presentation is all the more real the less it dispenses with the reality outside the aesthetic sphere. No matter how low one gauges the value of the mass ornament, its degree of reality is still higher than that of artistic productions which cultivate outdated noble sentiments in obsolete forms—even if it means nothing more than that.

The process of history is a battle between a weak and distant reason and the forces of nature that ruled over heaven and earth in the myths. After the twilight of the gods, the gods did not abdicate: the old nature within and outside man continues to assert itself. It gave rise to the great cultures of humanity, which must die like any creation of nature, and it serves as the ground for the superstructures of a mythological thinking which affirms nature in its omnipotence. Despite all the variations in the structure of such mythological thinking, which changes from epoch to epoch, it always respects the boundaries that nature has drawn. It acknowledges the organism as the ur-form; it is refracted in the formed quality of what exists: it yields to the workings of fate. It reflects the premises of nature in all spheres without rebelling against their exist-
ence. Organic sociology, which sets up the natural organism as the prototype for social organization, is no less mythological than nationalism, which knows no higher unity than the unison of the nation's face.

*Reason* does not operate within the circle of natural life. Its concern is to introduce truth into the world. Its realm has already been intimiated in genuine *fairy tales*, which are not stories about miracles but rather announcements of the miraculous advent of justice. There is profound historical significance in the fact that the *Thousand and One Nights* turned up precisely in the France of the Enlightenment and that eighteenth-century reason recognized the reason of the fairy tales as its equal. Even in the early days of history, mere nature was suspended in the fairy tale so that truth could prevail. Natural power is defeated by the powerlessness of the good; fidelity triumphs over the arts of sorcery.

In serving the breakthrough of truth, the historical process becomes a *process of denmythologization* which effects a radical deconstruction of the positions that the natural continually reoccupied. The French Enlightenment is an important example of the struggle between reason and the mythological delusions that have invaded the domains of religion and politics. This struggle continues, and in the course of history it may be that nature, increasingly stripped of its magic, will become more and more pervious to reason.

The *capitalist epoch* is a stage in the process of demystification. The type of thinking that corresponds to the present economic system has, to an unprecedented degree, made possible the domination and use of nature as a self-contained entity. What is decisive here, however, is not the fact that this thinking provides a means to exploit nature; if human beings were merely exploiters of nature, then nature would have triumphed over nature. Rather, what is decisive is that this thinking fosters ever greater independence from natural conditions and thereby creates a space for the intervention of reason. It is the *rationality* of this thinking (which emanates to some extent from the reason of fairy tales) that accounts—though not exclusively—for the bourgeois revolutions of the last one hundred fifty years, the revolutions that settled the score with the natural powers of the church (itself entangled in the affairs of its age), of the monarchy, and of the feudal system. The unstoppable decomposition of these and other mythological ties is reason's good fortune, since the fairy tale can become reality only on the ruins of the natural unities.

However, the *Ratio* of the capitalist economic system is not reason itself but a murky reason. Once past a certain point, it abandons the truth in which it participates. *It does not encompass man*. The operation of the production process is not regulated according to man's needs, and man does not serve as the foundation for the structure of the socioeconomic organization. Indeed, at no point whatsoever is the system founded on the basis of man. "The basis of man": this does not mean that capitalist thinking should cultivate man as a historically produced form that it ought to allow him to go unchallenged as a personality and should satisfy the demands made by his nature. The adherents of this position reproach capitalism's rationalism for raping man, and yearn for the return of a community that would be capable of preserving the allegedly human element much better than capitalism. Leaving aside the stultifying effect of such regressive stances, they fail to grasp capitalism's core defect: it rationalizes not too much but rather *too little*. The thinking promoted by capitalism resists culminating in that reason which arises from the basis of man.

The current site of capitalist thinking is marked by *abstractness*. The predominance of this abstractness today establishes a spiritual space that encompasses all expression. The objection raised against this abstract mode of thought—that it is incapable of grasping the actual substance of life and therefore must give way to concrete observation of phenomena—does indeed identify the limits of abstraction. As an objection it is premature, however, when it is raised in favor of that false mythological concreteness whose aim is organism and form. A return to this sort of concreteness would sacrifice the already acquired capacity for abstraction, but without overcoming abstractness. The latter is the expression of a rationality grown obdurate. Determinations of meaning rendered as abstract generalities—such as determinations in the eco-
monic, social, political, or moral domain—do not give reason what rightfully belongs to reason. Such determinations fail to consider the empirical; one could draw any utilitarian application whatsoever from these abstractions devoid of content. Only behind the barrier of these abstractions can one find the individual rational insights that correspond to the particularity of the given situation. Despite the substantiality one can demand of them, such insights are "concrete" only in a derivative sense; in any case they are not "concrete" in the vulgar sense, which uses the term to substantiate points of view entangled in natural life.—The abstractness of contemporary thinking is thus ambivalent. From the perspective of the mythological doctrines, in which nature naively asserts itself, the process of abstraction—as employed, for example, by the natural sciences—is a gain in rationality which detracts from the resplendence of the things of nature. From the perspective of reason, the same process of abstraction appears to be determined by nature; it gets lost in an empty formalism under whose guise the natural is accorded free rein because it does not let through the insights of reason which could strike at the natural. The prevailing abstractness reveals that the process of demythologization has not come to an end.

Present-day thinking is confronted with the question as to whether it should open itself up to reason or continue to push on against it without opening up at all. It cannot transgress its self-imposed boundaries without fundamentally changing the economic system that constitutes its infrastructure; the continued existence of the latter entails the continued existence of present-day thinking. In other words, the unchecked development of the capitalist system fosters the unchecked growth of abstract thinking (or forces it to become bogged down in a false concreteness). The more abstractness consolidates itself, however, the more man is left behind, un governed by reason. If his thought midway takes a detour into the abstract, thereby preventing the true contents of knowledge from breaking through, man will once again be rendered subject to the forces of nature. Instead of suppressing these forces, this thinking that has lost its way provokes their rebellion itself by disregarding the very reason that alone could confront such forces and make them submit. It is merely a consequence of the unhampered expansion of capitalism's power that the dark forces of nature continue to rebel ever more threateningly, thereby preventing the advent of the man of reason.

Like abstractness, the mass ornament is ambivalent. On the one hand its rationality reduces the natural in a manner that does not allow man to wither away, but that, on the contrary, were it only carried through to the end, would reveal man's most essential element in all its purity. Precisely because the bearer of the ornament does not appear as a total personality—that is, as a harmonious union of nature and "spirit" in which the former is emphasized too much and the latter too little—he becomes transparent to the man determined by reason. The human figure enlisted in the mass ornament has begun the exodus from lush organic splendor and the constitution of individuality toward the realm of anonymity to which it relinquishes itself when it stands in truth and when the knowledge radiating from the basis of man dissolves the contours of visible natural form. In the mass ornament nature is deprived of its substance, and it is just this that points to a condition in which the only elements of nature capable of surviving are those that do not resist illumination through reason. Thus, in old Chinese landscape paintings the trees, ponds, and mountains are rendered only as sparse ornamental signs drawn in ink. The organic center has been removed and the remaining unconnected parts are composed according to laws that are not those of nature but laws given by a knowledge of truth, which, as always, is a function of its time. Similarly, it is only remnants of the complex of man that enter into the mass ornament. They are selected and combined in the aesthetic medium according to a principle which represents form-bursting reason in a purer way than those other principles that preserve man as an organic unity.

Viewed from the perspective of reason, the mass ornament reveals itself as a mythological cult that is masquerading in the garb of abstraction. Compared to the concrete immediacy of other corporeal presentations, the ornament's conformity to reason is thus an illusion. In
reality the ornament is the crass manifestation of inferior nature. The latter can flourish all the more freely, the more decisively capitalist Ratio is cut off from reason and bypasses man as it vanishes into the void of the abstract. In spite of the rationality of the mass pattern, such patterns simultaneously give rise to the natural in its impenetrability. Certainly man as an organic being has disappeared from these ornaments, but that does not suffice to bring man's basis to the fore; on the contrary, the remaining little mass particle cuts itself off from this basis just as any general formal concept does. Admittedly, it is the legs of the Tiller Girls that swing in perfect parallel, not the natural unity of their bodies, and it is also true that the thousands of people in the stadium form one single star. But this star does not shine, and the legs of the Tiller Girls are an abstract designation of their bodies. Reason speaks wherever it disintegrates the organic unity and rips open the natural surface (no matter how cultivated the latter may be); it dissects the human form here only so that the undistorted truth can fashion man anew. But reason has not penetrated the mass ornament; its patterns are mute. The Ratio that gives rise to the ornament is strong enough to invoke the mass and to expunge all life from the figures constituting it. It is too weak to find the human beings within the mass and to render the figures in the ornament transparent to knowledge. Because this Ratio lies from reason and takes refuge in the abstract, uncontrolled nature proliferates under the guise of rational expression and uses abstract signs to display itself. It can no longer transform itself into powerful symbolic forms, as it could among primitive peoples and in the era of religious cults. This power of a language of signs has withdrawn from the mass ornament under the influence of the same rationality that keeps its muteness from bursting open. Thus, bare nature manifests itself in the mass ornament—the very nature that also resists the expression and apprehension of its own meaning. It is the rational and empty form of the cult, devoid of any explicit meaning, that appears in the mass ornament. As such, it proves to be a relapse into mythology of an order so great that one can hardly imagine its being exceeded, a relapse which, in turn, again betrays the degree to which capitalist Ratio is closed off from reason.

The role that the mass ornament plays in social life confirms that it is the spurious progeny of bare nature. The intellectually privileged who, while unwilling to recognize it, are an appendage of the prevailing economic system have not even perceived the mass ornament as a sign of this system. They disavow the phenomenon in order to continue seeking edification at art events that have remained untouched by the reality present in the stadium patterns. The masses who so spontaneously adopted these patterns are superior to their detractors among the educated class to the extent that they at least roughly acknowledge the undisguised facts. The same rationality that controls the bearers of the patterns in real life also governs their submersion in the corporeal, allowing them thereby to immortalize current reality. These days, there is not only one Walter Stolzing singing prize songs that glorify body culture. It is easy to see through the ideology of such songs, even if the term "body culture" does indeed justifiably combine two words that belong together by virtue of their respective meanings. The unlimited importance ascribed to the physical cannot be derived from the limited value it deserves. Such importance can be explained only by the alliance that organized physical education maintains with the establishment, in some cases unknown to its front-line supporters. Physical training expropriates people's energy, while the production and mindless consumption of the ornamental patterns divert them from the imperative to change the reigning order. Reason can gain entrance only with difficulty when the masses it ought to pervade yield to sensations afforded by the godless mythological cult. The latter's social meaning is equivalent to that of the Roman circus games, which were sponsored by those in power.

Among the various attempts to reach a higher sphere, many have been willing to relinquish once again the rationality and level of reality attained by the mass ornament. The bodily exertions in the field of rhythmic gymnastics, for example, have aims that go beyond those of personal hygiene—namely, the expression of spruced-up states of the soul—to which instructors of body culture often add world views. These
practices, whose impossible aesthetics can be ignored entirely, seek to recapture just what the mass ornament had happily left behind: the organic connection of nature with something the all too modest temperament takes to be soul or spirit—that is, exalting the body by assigning it meanings which emanate from it and may indeed be spiritual but which do not contain the slightest trace of reason. Whereas the mass ornament presents mute nature without any superstructure whatsoever, rhythmic gymnastics, according to its own account, goes further and expropriates the higher mythological levels, thereby strengthening nature’s dominance all the more. It is just one example among many other equally hopeless attempts to reach a higher life from out of mass existence. Most of these depend in a genuinely romantic way on forms and contents that have long since succumbed to the somewhat justified critique of capitalist Ratio. In their desire to once again give man a link to nature that is more solid than the one he has today, they discover the connection to the higher sphere, not by appealing to a still unrealized reason in this world but by retreating into mythological structures of meaning. Their fate is irreality, for when even a glimmer of reason shines through at some point in the world, even the most sublime entity that tries to shield itself from it must perish. Enterprises that ignore our historical context and attempt to reconstruct a form of state, a community, a mode of artistic creation that depends upon a type of man who has already been impugned by contemporary thinking—a type of man who by all rights no longer exists—such enterprises do not transcend the mass ornament’s empty and superficial shallowness but flee from its reality. The process leads directly through the center of the mass ornament, not away from it. It can move forward only when thinking circumscribes nature and produces man as he is constituted by reason. Then society will change. Then, too, the mass ornament will fade away and human life itself will adopt the traits of that ornament into which it develops, through its confrontation with truth, in fairy tales.
People today who still have time for boredom and yet are not bored are certainly just as boring as those who never get around to being bored. For their self has vanished—the self whose presence, particularly in this so bustling world, would necessarily compel them to tarry\(^1\) for a while without a goal, neither here nor there.

Most people, of course, do not have much leisure time. They pursue a livelihood on which they expend all their energies, simply to earn enough for the bare necessities. To make this tiresome obligation more tolerable, they have invented a work ethic that provides a moral veil for their occupation and at least affords them a certain moral\(^2\) satisfaction. It would be exaggerated to claim that the pride in considering oneself an ethical being dispels every type of boredom. Yet the vulgar boredom of daily drudgery is not actually what is at issue here, since it neither kills people nor awakens them to new life, but merely expresses a dissatisfaction that would immediately disappear if an occupation more pleasant than the morally sanctioned one became available. Nevertheless, people whose duties occasionally make them yawn may be less boring than those who do their business by inclination. The latter, unhappy types, are pushed deeper and deeper into the hustle and bustle until eventually they no longer know where their head is, and the extraordinary, radical boredom that might be able to reunite them with their heads remains eternally distant for them.

There is no one, however, who has no leisure time at all. The office is not a permanent sanctuary, and Sundays are an institution. Thus, in principle, during those beautiful hours of free time everyone would have
the opportunity to rouse himself into real boredom. But although one
wants to do nothing, things are done to one: the world makes sure that
one does not find oneself. And even if one perhaps isn’t interested in it,
the world itself is much too interested for one to find the peace and quiet
necessary to be as thoroughly bored with the world as it ultimately
deserves.

In the evening one saunters through the streets, replete with an unful-
fillment from which a fullness could sprout. Illuminated words glide by
on the rooftops, and already one is banished from one’s own emptiness
into the alien advertisement. One’s body takes root in the asphalt, and,
with the enlightening revelations of the illuminations, one’s spirit—which is no longer one’s own—roams ceaselessly out of the
night and into the night. If only it were allowed to disappear! But, like
Pegasus prancing on a carousel, this spirit must run in circles and may
never tire of praising to high heaven the glory of a liqueur and the
merits of the best five-cent cigarette. Some sort of magic spurs that
spirit relentlessly amid the thousand electric bulbs, out of which it
constitutes and reconstitutes itself into glittering sentences.

Should the spirit by chance return at some point, it soon takes its
leave in order to allow itself to be cranked away in various guises in a
movie theater. It squats as a fake Chinaman in a fake opium den, trans-
forms itself into a trained dog that performs ludicrously clever tricks to
please a film diva, gathers up into a storm amid towering mountain
peaks, and turns into both a circus artist and a lion at the same time.
How could it resist these metamorphoses? The posters swoop into the
empty space that the spirit itself would not mind pervading: they drag
it in front of the silver screen, which is as barren as an emptied-out
palazzo. And once the images begin to emerge one after another, there
is nothing left in the world besides their evanescence. One forgets
oneself in the process of gawking, and the huge dark hole is animated
with the illusion of a life that belongs to no one and exhausts everyone.

Radio likewise vaporizes beings, even before they have intercepted
a single spark. Since many people feel compelled to broadcast, one
finds oneself in a state of permanent receptivity, constantly pregnant

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with London, the Eiffel Tower, and Berlin. Who would want to resist
the invitation of those dainty headphones? They gleam in living rooms
and entwine themselves around heads all by themselves: and instead of
fostering cultivated conversation (which certainly can be a bore), one
becomes a playground for worldwide noises that, regardless of their own
potentially objective boredom, do not even grant one’s modest right to
personal boredom. Silent and lifeless, people sit side by side as if their
souls were wandering about far away. But these souls are not wandering
according to their own preference; they are badgered by the news
hounds, and soon no one can tell anymore who is the hunter and who
is the hunted. Even in the café, where one wants to roll up into a ball
like a porcupine and become aware of one’s insignificance, an imposing
loudspeaker effaces every trace of private existence. The announce-
ments it blares forth dominate the space of the concert intermissions,
and the waiters (who are listening to it themselves) indignantly refuse
the unreasonable requests to get rid of this gramophonic mimicry.

As one is enduring this species of antennal fate, the five continents
are drawing ever closer. In truth, it is not we who extend ourselves out
toward them; rather, it is their cultures that appropriate us in their
boundless imperialism. It is as if one were having one of those dreams
provoked by an empty stomach: a tiny ball rolls toward you from very
far away, expands into a close-up, and finally roars right over you. You
can neither stop it nor escape it, but the curled-up, helpless little
doll swept away by the giant colossus in whose ambit it expires. Flight
is impossible. Should the Chinese imbroglio be tactfully disentangled,
one is sure to be harried by an American boxing match: the Occident
remains omnipresent, whether one acknowledges it or not. All the
world-historical events on this planet—not only the current ones but
also past events, whose love of life knows no shame—have only one
desire: to set up a rendezvous wherever they suppose us to be present.
But the masters are not to be found in their quarters. They’ve gone on
a trip and cannot be located, having long since ceded the empty cham-
bers to the "surprise party" that occupies the rooms, pretending to be
the masters.

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But what if one refuses to allow oneself to be chased away? Then boredom becomes the only proper occupation, since it provides a kind of guarantee that one is, so to speak, still in control of one's own existence. If one were never bored, one would presumably not really be present at all and would thus be merely one more object of boredom, as was claimed at the outset. One would light up on the rooftops or spool by as a filmstrip. But if indeed one is present, one would have no choice but to be bored by the ubiquitous abstract racket that does not allow one to exist, and, at the same time, to find oneself boring for existing in it.

On a sunny afternoon when everyone is outside, one would do best to hang about in the train station or, better yet, stay at home, draw the curtains, and surrender oneself to one's boredom on the sofa. Shrouded in tristesse, one flirts with ideas that even become quite respectable in the process, and one considers various projects that, for no reason, pretend to be serious. Eventually one becomes content to do nothing more than be with oneself, without knowing what one actually should be doing—sympathetically touched by the mere glass grasshopper on the tabletop, that cannot jump because it is made of glass and by the silliness of a little cactus plant that thinks nothing of its own whimsicality. Frivolous, like these decorative creations, one harbors only an inner restlessness without a goal, a longing that is pushed aside, and a weariness with that which exists without really being.

If, however, one has the patience, the sort of patience specific to legitimate boredom, then one experiences a kind of bliss that is almost unearthly. A landscape appears in which colorful peacocks strut about, and images of people suffused with soul come into view. And look—your own soul is likewise swelling, and in ecstasy you name what you have always lacked: the great passion. Were this passion—which shimmers like a comet—to descend, were it to envelop you, the others, and the world—oh, then boredom would come to an end, and everything that exists would be . . .

Yet people remain distant images, and the great passion fizzes out on the horizon. And in the boredom that refuses to abate, one hatches bagatelles that are as boring as this one.