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Lacan, the City, and the Utopian Symptom

An Analysis of Abject Urban Spaces

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This article examines the concept of utopia by focusing on the distance between the utopian myths and the actual city they originate in. While the individual work of utopian fiction offers to the attentive reader a map of the neuroses of the author, when taken in general as a genre or type of social conception, it provides the reader with a map of the city as a neurotic social object. Utopia can thus be read as a type of neurotic psychological topography. From this analytic basis, a different mode of inquiry may be deployed, a mode of inquiry that begins with specific urban artifacts that are omitted from the utopian model. In this analysis, the author focuses on the cemetery and the sewer. These abject or pathological urban sites carry a form of contaminative excess within their structures and as such become at once the focal point of anxiety and irreducible fascination.

Keywords: Jacques Lacan; Giorgio Agamben; Georges Bataille; Utopia; death drive; abjection

Great monuments are erected like dikes, opposing the logic and majesty of authority against all disturbing elements: it is in the form of cathedral or palace that Church or State speaks to the multitudes and imposes silence upon them.


In an essay titled “Varieties of Literary Utopias,” Northrop Frye (1965) provides us with a structural definition of utopian literature:

There are two social conceptions which can be expressed only in terms of myth. One is the social contract, which presents an account of the origins of society. The other is the utopia, which presents an imaginative vision of the telos or end at which social life aims. These two myths both begin in an analysis of the present, the society that confronts the
According to Frye, the utopian literary form is a type of “speculative myth” that the author constructs in reaction to the society that he or she is confronted with (p. 323). As such, each individual utopian project bears the unique marks of the historical situation in which it was written, yet as a genre, a consistent structure is maintained. In the most general sense, utopia is a fictive representation of an ideal social structure. This social structure is uniquely urban; as Frye observes, utopia “is primarily a vision of the orderly city and of a city dominated society” (p. 324). Utopian myths thus maintain a critical distance between themselves and the city they originate in. The function of this critical distance is diagnostic; the utopia exposes the pathologies that infect the society that it examines by presenting a rationalized, healthy city. The utopian city acts as a hyper-rational mirror; it reflects the current city’s lack of rationality. It highlights these lacks within the city by excluding them from its own structure, but this exclusion is incomplete. The utopian model is both hyper-rational and hyperdisciplinary, but its perfection is not complete; it exists as an ideal field of containment or cordon sanitaire, but it is not divine, it is not New Jerusalem. Much like Walter Benjamin’s (1986) concept of “divine” violence, which does not found the law but rather destroys it, the “divine” city necessarily entails the destruction of the profane city (p. 297). In contrast, the utopian city lies outside of the divine order; it serves its function and gains its significance only in relation to the profane city. Its role is both comparative and corrective. It does not destroy, but rather, it diagnoses and prescribes in an attempt to spatially contain, control, and if possible expel that which it judges to be pathological.

At this point, we can give our question a general formulation: What is the relationship between the city and utopia? Now if we accept the argument that the utopian model is an idealized image of the urban conditions that it is projected from and that its function is diagnostic, then clearly, utopia exists as the spatial expression of a desire to stabilize and rationalize identity. This desire is asserted in and through the negation and containment of elements that are determined to be heterogeneous or irrational and as such inessential. The utopian city can thus be read as a type of neurotic biopolitical dreamscape. The author as architect constructs this ideal city by selectively amplifying particular social structures that he or she views as essential and eliminating or at the very least containing the structures and elements that he or she deems inessential or irrational. As a result, two forms of life are clearly differentiated and divided. As Giorgio Agamben (1998) observes in Homo Sacer, it is the exclusion of the inessential or “bare” life that “founds the city of men”; this exclusion also serves as the foundation of utopia, but it is in utopia that this exclusion is taken to its limit (p. 7). Ironically, the inessential elements that the architect strives to eliminate from or contain within the utopian construct are given form in their exclusion. Through the process of abjection, the utopian model grants the irrational a spatial form within the city. Thus, utopia localizes irrationality; it concentrates it in both the sites that it does not include and those that it disciplines. These absent or abject sites become all the more interesting when they are sites that the current city is unimaginable without.

A list of such sites would be quite long and somewhat deceptive, as it would implicitly suggest that these pathological sites could be catalogued and as such categorically divided from the body of the city, but they contaminate the city in a viral or protean manner, infiltrating it to its very core. These contagious sites and the form of life that they reflect (Agamben’s “bare” life) are inseparable from the structure of the city. As
Agamben (1998) suggests, the city begins with the exclusion of “bare” life, but this exclusion is always already an inclusion, an embedding in the structure of the city (p. 7). The role of the city can thus be seen as the containment of the threat of “bare” life, and it is this role that the utopian model brings to its limit. In the first article published in the Enzylopaedia Acephalica, Bataille (1996) comments on the disciplinary role of architecture:

Architecture is the expression of the very soul of societies, just as human physiognomy is the expression of the individuals’ souls. It is, however, particularly to the physiognomies of the official personages (prelate, magistrates, admirals) that this comparison pertains. In fact it is only the ideal soul of society which has the authority to command and prohibit, that is expressed in architectural compositions properly speaking. Thus great monuments are erected like dikes, opposing the logic and majesty of authority against all disturbing elements: it is in the form of cathedral or palace that Church or State speaks to the multitudes and imposes silence upon them. It is, in fact, obvious that monuments inspire social prudence and often real fear. The taking of the Bastille is symbolic of this state of things: it is hard to explain this crowd movement other than by the animosity of the people against the monuments that are their real masters. (pp. 35-36)

This constant effort to contain grants the city a structural dynamism; it shifts and adapts to the flow and spread of what could be described as epidemiological patterns. Slums, red-light districts, prisons, asylums, sewers, cemeteries, dumping grounds, et cetera; the contaminated site is mobile, it spreads, and this spreading entails criminogenic effects. These sites are excluded or, rather, muted in the utopian model. This curious series or pattern of exclusions grants the utopian city a ridged structure; in utopia the threat of bare life is contained, and thus the city and life in the city seems static. The static and sanitary quality of the utopia immediately confronts the reader and brings with it a sense of foreboding. Frye (1965) captures this reaction in an imaginary dialogue between a utopia writer and a reader:

Reader: “I can see that this society might work, but I wouldn’t want to live in it.” Writer: “What you mean is that you don’t want you present ritual habits disturbed. My utopia would feel different from the inside, where the ritual habits would be customary and so carry with them a sense of freedom rather than constraint.” Reader: “Maybe so, but my sense of freedom right now is derived from not being involved in your society. If I were, I’d either feel constrained or I’d be too unconscious to be living a fully human life at all.” (p. 328)

The “life” of the utopian citizen is unimaginable to the reader in anything but an abstract or observational sense. This unimaginable quality problematizes the applicability of the utopian model to the reader by raising the question of function. In short, the reader asks, What are they doing there? What do the fictional inhabitants of these hyperefficient metropolitan systems do on a daily basis? What end to they strive towards? The absence of an immediate answer to the question of function is not indicative of a lack of imagination on the reader’s part but of a misunderstanding of the function of the utopian projection. We cannot imagine ourselves as citizens of these fictive cities precisely because the author does not invite us in as we are. Rather, he or she encourages us to see how we must change ourselves. As in Plato’s Republic (1997), the city and soul are interdependent structures that must be governed in the same manner if social harmony is to be achieved. The utopian text acts as a vehicle for
a particular type of “life”; it entices the reader with the promise of an answer to the question of identity or at the very least a momentary and entertaining distraction, but we find, entwined within the text, a mirror that offers us a disjointed reflection of ourselves. This mirror presents to us an image of ourselves as we should be, rational and sanitary, the very model of the “good” life; in this image, we do not see ourselves as we are but, rather, as we could or must be. The aim of the text is thus transformative; it reveals to us the fact that we are unclean and irrational, but it assures us that we do not have to be this way. If we accept its prescription, if we embrace the “good” life, then we will no longer be unclean.

The utopian microcosm is as bio-political as it is neurotic. As Lacan notes, “The structure of a neurosis is essentially a question,” and this question “is a question that being poses for the subject” (1993, p. 174; 1977, p. 168). For Lacan (1993), there are two general forms of neurosis, which are distinguished by the content of their respective questions; hysteria, which is centered on the question sexual identity, and obsessional neurosis, which focuses on the question of death and existence (pp. 189-190). These questions “are as it happens the two ultimate questions that have precisely no solution in the signifier,” and it is this lack of a solution that “gives neurotics their existential value” (p. 190). Utopian myths appeal to the neurotic desire for a definitive answer to the question of identity. They harness the compulsive energy of this desire by showing the subject its flaws. They display these flaws by constructing an image of an ideal social order in which these flaws have been separated from the “true” life of the subject; its solution is bio-political. The “life” of the utopian citizen is thus unimaginable to the reader precisely because it is a life in which this question of identity has been settled; it is a life that is no longer neurotic, and as such its being is no longer an issue for it. The individual work of utopian fiction offers to the attentive reader a map of the neuroses of the author, but taken in general as a genre or type of social conception, it provides the reader with a map of the city as a neurotic social object. Utopia can thus be read as a type of neurotic psychological topography.

The usual mode of inquiry used to address utopia begins with the question of disjunction. The utopian model is viewed as a set of possibilities that may be used to critique current urban conditions and suggest possibilities for modification. In accordance with this procedure, the question becomes, How does this diagnostic projection differ from the present, and what does it prescribe for the future? The model is thus treated as a diagnosis of the pathologies of the urban conditions from which it is projected from. Yet the most interesting question concerning utopia is not the possible future that it presents to us but the present conditions that it omits. It is in its selective omission of particular material realities that the model’s primary function is exposed. This function is both prescription and evasion or, more clearly, evasion through projection. In short, the utopian model can be read as a neurotic symptom whose very purpose is to answer the recurrent question of identity, but the answer that it promises cannot be found in the signifier. As a result, the utopia is always incomplete, and as such it gets dragged into a process of metonymic supplementation. As Aldo Rossi (1984) observes in The Architecture of the City, the singularity of the city or, to use his term, urban artifact, “begins in the event and in the sign that has marked the event” (p. 106). There is an implicit disjunction here; the sign, the built artifact, marks the event, commemorates it, but it does not silence the undecidable nature of the event. As a result, the neurotic demand for an answer cannot be silenced by the architectural façade, and the inertia of the utopian desire is spent on a constant metonymic shifting of the built environment. This process is effectively captured in Alex Proyas’s film Dark City; the
question that drives the extraterrestrial beings to continually alter the form of the city and the social positions of its inhabitants is the question of essence, the secret of the human soul. This process suggests that the city is neurotic in structure. From this analytic basis, a different mode of inquiry may be deployed, a mode of inquiry that begins with specific urban artifacts that are omitted in the utopian model.

An inquiry into the relationship between particular urban artifacts and utopia is an inquiry into the relationship between psychological topology and the physical topography of the city. Rossi (1984) suggests the possibility of such a project through his concept of locus, which he defines as the relationship between “a certain specific location and the buildings that are in it” or, in more general terms, the relationship between the space and the place of urban artifacts (pp. 103, 107). By questioning the relationship between the space and the place of architecture one is, as Rossi notes, drawn to question the connections to, and precise articulation of, the locus itself as a singular artifact determined by its space and time, by its topographical dimensions and its form, by its being the seat of a succession of ancient and recent events, by its memory. (p. 107)

Rossi’s focus on the locus brings with it a psychological approach to architecture. An approach that centers on the connection between space and place or the sign and the event, and as such it is an approach that begins to touch upon the excess of the urban artifact, the irrationality of the city. This project suggests a possible urban extension of Lacan’s analytical framework. This possibility is contained within Lacan’s formulation of the unconscious and extimacy. According to Lacan (1977), the unconscious is at once outside and inside of the subject; that is, its structure is Moebian. Much like Rossi’s concept of locus, it subverts Euclidean space. If we accept Lacan’s argument and agree that the unconscious is outside, on the side of the object, then the urban artifacts that compose the fabric of the city are, like the unconscious, “structured like a language” and may be analyzed as such (Lacan, 1993, p. 167).

Our analytical point of entry will be abject urban artifacts. This includes both sites that are omitted from utopian projects and what could be referred to as “sites of containment,” that is, sites in which the utopian city concentrates its disciplinary apparatus. These disciplinary sites exist as “necessary evils,” but their function extends beyond mere practical need; they also serve as examples of the form of life that the utopian citizens must not live; in these sites, bare life is merged with the most denigrated forms of social utility. More specifically, for the purposes of this analysis, we will confine our focus to the cemetery and the sewer. These abject or pathological urban sites carry a form of contaminative excess (Lacan’s objet petit a) within their structures and as such become at once the focal point of anxiety and irreducible fascination (Lacan, 1998a, pp. 179-180). The utopian gaze avoids these objects, it evades them by employing its defensive mechanisms, it represses and negates, yet it is this very aversion that fuels its desire for the sanity of the utopia. It is fixated on the abject; it orbits around it, reading it as both promise and curse. Architecture, or at least architecture in its utopian mode, that is, architecture as the desire for a locus solus, a singular place, confronts its limit in these contaminated objects. These urban sites are thoroughly saturated with an undecidable heterogeneity, and as such they must be contained in order to preserve and defend the rational structure of the city, but these sites resist all forms of containment; they seep into the fabric of the city. The ironic destiny of utopia is that it is constituted by that which it omits—and that this residual lack continually returns. These
pathological artifacts are the focal point, as it is through an analysis of what is omitted that the neurotic nature and Moebian structure of the city can be addressed. In short, in the pathological site, the relationship between space and place is stretched to its limit, and as such, by questioning this site, we question the relationship between the city and the desire called utopia.

Hallowed Ground: Cemeteries, Saturation, and the Necropolis

Instead of letting itself be described in its own event, death concerns us by its nonsense.

—Emmanuel Levinas, God, Death and Time (2000, p. 21)

The founders of a new colony, whatever utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery and another portion as the site of a prison.


There is, as Levinas (2000) notes, an unsettling nonsense to death. “The point that death seems to mark in our time (i.e., our relationship to the infinite) is a pure question mark,” but is this question mark strictly confined to “our time” (p. 21)? Could we not argue that it is also built into “our space”? The city defines the place of death; within its boundaries it forms distinct places of sanctified burial (the churchyard, catacomb, mausoleum, etc.), yet these sanctified burial sites must always be defined in opposition to that which is buried “beyond the pale.” In the most general sense, to be “beyond the pale” is to be outside of the boundaries of a defined space. The etymology of the English word pale is interesting here, as it is taken from the French word pal, meaning stake, and as such it is indicative of a territorial marker both literally, as an actual physical marker, and figuratively, as a symbol in heraldry. The French is in turn derived from the Latin word palus (a wooden post used by Roman soldiers to represent an opponent during fighting practice), which is related to pangere (to fix or fasten) and pacere (to agree or form a pact; Barnhard, 1999, p. 748; Oxford English Dictionary, 2007). The connections between boundary, law, and enemy are significant here, as those whose bodies are buried “beyond the pale” constitute a second order among the dead. The first order of death is the death that is structurally commemorated; it is the death of the “citizen” that is marked by structured rituals and ceremonies. The second order of death is the one whose memory is to be forgotten, the condemned, who, as Agamben (1998) observes, exist under the ban of sovereignty and as such serve as the medium of the “force of law” (pp. 110-111). For this second order of death, the “pale” is the “stake” of capital punishment; through its impalement, crucifixion, or immolation at the stake, the body of the “criminal” marks the boundary of the law; as Agamben notes, “In the city, the banishment of sacred life is more internal than every interiority and more external than every extraneousness” (p. 111). These two orders of death serve as markers that define the boundaries of the city, and as such their aim is to answer the question that death opens, yet this question remains structurally embedded in the burial site.

In the Republic, Socrates employs the spectacle of death “beyond the pale” in his retelling of the story of Leontius’s gaze,
Leontius, the son of Aglaion, was going up from the Piraeus along the outside of the North Wall when he saw some corpses lying at the executioner’s feet. He had an appetite to look at them but at the same time he was disgusted and turned away. For a time he struggled with himself and covered his face, but, finally, overpowered by the appetite, he pushed his eyes wide open and rushed towards the corpses, saying, “Look for yourselves, you evil wretches, take your fill of the beautiful sight!” (Plato, 1997, p. 1071)

For Socrates, this story is an illustration of the role of the “will” in his tripartite division of the soul; the conflict between appetite and reason necessitates the intervention of a third party, the “will.” With this division mapped, the number, kinds, and classes of the city correspond to that of the soul, and thus the conflict of the faculties is explained, but the threefold structure that is used for both the city and the soul is the structure of an interior, a bounded space, yet the example interestingly includes an exterior. The spatial arrangement of this scene is significant; the corpses (plural) are outside of the city walls at the executioner’s feet, and as such they are the bodies of those who have been placed outside of the law. The scene of punishment is not concealed; it is a designed spectacle, an object lesson in the “force of law,” and as such the bodies are displayed in a particular manner in order to communicate a particular message. The corpses are on display, but they are not on display in the same manner as a corpse at a wake or funeral; these corpses effectively mark the limits of the city as both a physical and a politico-legal entity. Leontius’s reaction is interesting here; he is at once disgusted by and drawn to the sight of the corpses, and he spatially situates each reaction within himself. In this “civil war” of the soul, it is his own body, his eyes, that become the site of the illicit desire to see, and he, as the rational “voice,” reproaches them in anger and disgust. Notice here that the question of death is present in the form of an ambivalent reaction, yet the spatial determination of the corpse as being “outside” structures the spectator’s reaction; the way in which the corpses are displayed makes them disgusting. By seeing the exhibition of death “beyond the pale,” the subject internalizes the division that the law proclaims; the corpse, exhibited as “bare” death, acts as a marker for both the boundary of the city and the soul. The structural arrangement of the corpse effectively strips it of any suggestion of transcendence; it is pure body, a *corpus sans spritus*, and as such it acts as a final marker between the inside and the outside. Yeats (1998) captures a similar image in his poem, “The Crucifixion of the Outcast.”

“Stay, outcasts, yet a little while,” the crucified one called in a weak voice to the beggars, “and keep the beasts and the birds from me.” But the beggars were angry because he had called them outcasts, so they threw stones and mud at him, and went their way. Then the wolves gathered at the foot of the cross, and the birds flew lower and lower. And presently the birds lighted all at once upon his head and arms and shoulders, and began to peck at him, and the wolves began to eat his feet. “Outcasts,” he moaned, “have you also turned against the outcast?” (p. 156)

In order for the beggars to share in even the most meager form of the “good” life that the city offers within its walls, there must be a form of “life” that is outside of “life”; the crucified outcast fulfills this role by becoming the living dead. The impaled figure is exhibited as that which exists outside of life. It is abandoned, and through this abandonment the perimeter of both “life” and the “city” is marked out, but this mark does not seal the perimeter; the boundary is permeable and thus under constant threat. What emerges in this limit figure is not the clear and final division of the outside and
the inside but rather the radical crisis of the possibility of clearly distinguishing between what is outside and what is inside (Agamben, 1998, p. 25). We should mention here that the question of the death that exists “beyond the pale” does not end with the disappearance of spectacular forms of punishment. As Foucault notes, the transfer from the scaffold to the prison represents a reconfiguration of the disciplinary apparatus, but its aim remains constant: to designate, catalogue, and expose a limit, a “bare” life. With this shift, the distinction between the inside and the outside of the city becomes all the more problematic as the “carceral network” takes shape within the city in both compact and disseminated forms (Foucault, 1995, pp. 304-305).

The question of death is also reflected in the structure of the sanctified burial ground, but the configuration of this structure is decidedly different. In the death that occurs “beyond the pale,” the corpse is exposed in a radical sense; it is discarded like an empty husk, stripped of any residual shred of human significance, and in this exhibition of its nudity it becomes an object of disgust. Its presentation is structured to reveal its nonsignificance in terms of the “good” life. In the death of the citizen, the corpse is the site of an elaborate set of rituals and ceremonies that affirm its spiritual identity. The nudity of this corpse is hidden in the mortuary, it is remade in the image of the one who lived, but this cosmetic façade is unstable. The presentable corpse, dressed and painted, is a disturbing sight; no doubt this disturbance is muted by the façade and the rituals that aim to stabilize the image, but we cannot escape the paradoxical appearance of the ones we once knew as they never were. The corpse is the one who once lived, we cannot deny this, but it is this one as this one never was. This paradoxical disruption does not end with the burial of the corpse; it remains embedded in the architectural edifice that commemorates the dead citizen as an emblem of the “good” life. The burial ground is conditioned by the question of death; this question threatens to disrupt the utopian project and the “good” life that it prescribes. To compensate for this threat, the utopian project is put into operation. As a result, the built environment is shaped by the desire to avoid death. This desire to close the question of death or at least structure its expression in a socially useful manner is clearly displayed in the discourse that surrounds the development of the modern cemetery.

In A Celebration of Death, James Curl (1980) notes that “the large cemeteries that were developed in the nineteenth century were the result of a general movement towards the civilizing of urban man” (p. 206). Curl’s insightful historical analysis includes a wealth of invaluable quotations by the architects and urban planners that spearheaded the cemetery movement in Western Europe. For figures such as John Claudius Loudon (an influential 19th-century Scottish city planner and landscape architect), the burial ground serves two basic objectives: The first is practical, as it involves “the disposal of the remains of the dead in such a manner that their decomposition and return to the earth shall not prove injurious to the living, either by affecting the health or by shocking feelings, opinions, or prejudices,” and the secondary objective is “the improvement of the moral sentiments and the general taste of all classes and more especially of the great masses of society” (Curl, 1980, p. 245). The aesthetics of the cemetery was of great concern to Loudon, “for it must be obvious that the first step to rendering a churchyard a source of amelioration or instruction is to render it attractive” (Curl, 1980, p. 247). Landscape architecture thus operates on the burial ground by refining it into a useful tool of social instruction. This conversion of the churchyard into a useful social object involved a meticulous form of microengineering in which all of the details of the cemetery’s layout become relevant. Details such as which trees were “favourable to the expression . . . of solemnity” and the
elimination of flower beds due to “the appearance of being dug or moved for the purpose of cultivation” become essential to maintaining a state of quite repose (Curl, 1980, p. 250). Even a brief glance at the discourse surrounding the birth of the modern cemetery suggests that the cemetery has a distinct and as of yet unexplored role to play in the development of what Foucault (1995) refers to as the “carceral network,” but for our current purposes, it is enough to highlight the articulation of the dual roles that shape the cemetery as an architectural object. It is a combination of pragmatic hygienics and social engineering, a tool to instruct and improve the moral form of the masses, but in order to be effective, its built façade must effectively remove any and all suggestion of disturbance.

Functionally speaking, the cemetery is an integral part of the city, yet the relationship between this unquestionably necessary urban artifact and the remainder of the city is one of tension. This tension is the result of the disruption (the question death and the corruption of the corpse) that the place of the cemetery is supposed to let rest, to inter; the disruptive event of death resists the sign of the tomb that marks it. To an extent, this disruption is an effect of the pathogenic nature of the corpse, a manifestation of the pragmatic hygienics of urban planning, and yet the regulations that surround the place of burial extend beyond these practical concerns and are indicative of other motivations. These “other” motivations center on what Loudon refers to as the “amelioration” and “instruction” of the “moral sentiments”; the cemetery as the sanctified burial ground of the city must accomplish the impossible. It must, through its structure, provide an answer to the neurotic question of identity; it must give shape to the “good” life. Consider More’s (1992) discussion of burial in *Utopia,*

Almost all the Utopians are absolutely convinced that man’s bliss after death will be enormous and eternal; thus they lament every man’s sickness, but mourn over a death only if the man was torn from life despairingly and against his will. Such behaviour they take to be a very bad sign, as if the soul, being in anguish and conscious of guilt, dreaded death through a secret premonition of punishments to come. Besides, they suppose God can hardly be well pleased with the coming of one who when he is summoned, does not come gladly, but is dragged off reluctantly and against his will. Such a death fills the onlookers with horror and they carry away the corpse to the cemetery in melancholy silence. There, after begging God to have mercy on his spirit, and pardon his infirmities, they commit his body to the earth. But when a man dies blithely and full of good hope, they do not mourn for him, but carry the body cheerfully away, singing and commending the dead man’s soul to God. They cremate him in a spirit more of reverence than grief, and erect a tombstone on which the dead man’s honours are inscribed. As they go home, they talk of his character and deeds, and no part of his life is mentioned more frequently or more gladly than his joyful death. (pp. 75-76)

Here, the two types of funerals (burial and cremation) distinguish two types of reactions to death; the corpse of the one who feared death is buried in the cemetery under a “melancholy silence,” while the one who embraced death in hope is carried away to his or her cremation in song. These two types of ceremonies mark the event of death in a manner that gives shape to the “good” life. The fear of the one who is facing death is a bad “sign,” it fills the onlookers with “horror,” but what is the nature of their horror? Doubt here is a contagion that must be controlled; if doubt spreads from the dying to the living then the value of the “good” life is called into question, and the prescribed form of the “good” life can no longer claim to provide the answer to the question of existence. In this case, neurosis and its question begin an epidemic that
erodes the stability of the utopia. If the soul is, as Foucault (1995) argues, “the effect and instrument of political anatomy,” if it is “the prison of the body,” then the cemetery, as the political technology of the corpse, seals the prisons gates by providing an answer or, at the very least, a proper form to the question of death (p. 30). But, as we have noted, the answer that is offered and the structural form that it is given is always already under the threat of the question, a question that is given force by a neurotic compulsion. As a result, the sign that marks the event of death is haunted by an excess that cannot be resolved.

The cemetery or burial ground in general exists as an uncanny site within the urban fabric. That is to say, the burial ground is an urban artifact that is both estranged from the city and at the heart of it. It is an extimate site. Funereal architecture exists as an attempt to answer the question of existence. It does not provide this answer in a final and comprehensive sense; rather, it points the way to the after “life” by offering the subject a reassuring signpost on the road of the “good” life. Lacan’s objet petit a is relevant here; funereal architecture offers the subject a promise of that which it desires, a promise of completion, a promise of an end to the neurotic question of existence, but it does not deliver on this promise (1998a, pp. 179-180; 1998b, p. 87). This promise is conditional; in order to achieve this end, the subject must keep to the path of the “good” life; it must “live thus,” and thus the burial site strengthens the bars of the soul that shapes and conditions the body. The funereal artifact does not close the question of death. It gives shape to the question; it channels its neurotic force. It is the architectural machine that gives this anxious energy a trajectory. But, this site traffics in the uncontainable, in the nonsensical, in death, and as such tension and instability pervade its structure. The regulations that govern the use of this space, which are in effect regardless of the topographical positioning, are indicative of this tension. This tension manifests itself in the compulsion to regulate the place of the burial; yet while the boundaries of the cemetery are strictly demarcated, it is not, strictly speaking, contained. The place of the cemetery determines the use of the spaces that border it. The contaminative effect of the cemetery is regulated under the guise of a reverence for this place as sacred, as hallowed ground, but the ridged constraints of ritual and ceremony cannot suspend the uncanny effect of the sign of the grave. Despite the strict regulation of the various ceremonies and processions, which surround the internment of the dead, the union of the sign (of the grave) and the event (of death) is fundamentally incomplete.

The Labyrinth Below Babel: The Sewer System and Situated Desire

Surely, the State is the Sewer. Not just because it spews divine law from its ravenous mouth, but because it reigns as the law of cleanliness above its sewers.

—Dominique Laporte, History of Shit (1993, p. 56)

The city constantly produces waste in a myriad of forms, and as a result waste sites such as refuse heaps and sewers exist as necessary elements of urban structure. The use of the term site is somewhat deceptive in this instance, as it suggests that waste is localizable, that it has a final location or position in the city. While there are waste containment sites with definite locations, such as dumps or sewage-processing facilities, these containment sites are only one part of a sanitation network. This network is distributed
throughout the physical structure of the city, and it functions by constantly collecting and transporting waste from one area of the city to another. The need for waste management is in many ways unquestionable; a basic level of sanitation is necessary for the health of a city’s population, but this need for sanitation is bound to a demand that is not strictly pragmatic. The demand for cleanliness extends beyond the biological need for sanitation and relates to a set of moral principles and regulations that govern and define the “good” life. The need for sanitation involves the desire for cleanliness, and thus, unlike a need, it cannot be satisfied or fulfilled. Marx (1951) effectively captures the instability of this desire in his description of the lumpenproletariat in The Eighteenth Brumaire:

Alongside decayed roués with dubious means of subsistence and dubious origins, alongside ruined and adventurous off-shoots of the bourgeoisie, were vagabonds, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, lazzaroni, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, macquereaus, brothel-keepers, porters, literati, organ-grinders, ragpickers, knife-grinders, tinkers, beggars, in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass thrown hither and thither, which the French call la bohème. (p. 267)

Here, the “indefinite, disintegrated mass” are presented as human waste; they exist as by-products of the capitalist mode of production, and as such they inhibit the formation of a proletarian revolution. Marx shifts from English to French, Italian, and Latin in order to identify this indefinite mass and give his evident disgust a shape, but even so, this list is incomplete; it must be summarized “in short.” As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (1986) note in The Politics and Poetics of Transgression, while the lumpenproletariat are “marginal in terms of production,” they are “central to the ‘Imaginary,’ the object of disgust and fascination” (p. 129). In terms of urban topography, the sites that are set aside for the processing and containment of waste are uncontainable; they contaminate their surroundings, lowering property values and promoting the formation of slums. These contaminated sites, much like the lumpenproletariat that inhabit them, are “marginal in terms of production,” but they are central to the “Imaginary,” and this centrality is revealed in their exclusion from the utopian city.

This point involves some key questions: Why are these contaminated sites “central to the Imaginary”? What does this centrality entail? And how does this affect the relationship between the city and these sites? In Lacanian terms, the utopian city acts much like the ideal-ego. The ideal-ego originates in the primary identification that occurs in the mirror stage; it is the reflection, the specular image of the infant as whole and complete. This perception of a complete image brings with it a contrasting perception of the body as fragmented and incomplete. The anxiety generated by this experience solidifies the identification with the specular image and forms the ego (Lacan, 1977). The ego now relates to the ideal-ego as the promise of the future synthesis that will fill its gap; to quote Lacan, “The human being has a special relation with his own image—a relation of gap, of alienating tension,” and this “alienation is the imaginary as such” (1988b, p. 323; 1993, p. 146). The ego, and one could argue the city itself, is founded on the experience of this gap (this alienating distance between fragmentation and completeness) and the promise of unity. Thus, the importance of contaminated sites, in terms of the Imaginary, lies in their exclusion from the image of the ideal-ego or, for our purposes, the utopian city. This exclusion amplifies the subject’s anxiety by highlighting the contaminated state of the body as it presently exists. This, as we have argued, is the function of the utopian city. It functions as a diagnosis of the present city’s pathologies; it
functions by inducing shame, and this shame becomes the driving force behind the restructuring of the city. This process of restructuring centers on the contaminated sites that the utopian city revels; in Lacanian terms, these sites are topographical expressions of objet petit a. Perhaps the most conspicuous of these sites is the sewer.

The sewer is hidden within the foundations of the city; it both conceals and transports the offensive by-products of urban life in its labyrinthine passages, and yet at the same time, it is the perpetual object of forbidden wonder. There is an almost irresistible curiosity that compels us to wonder, “What is under the manhole?” Perhaps a hidden corpse or a secret passageway? If we are to believe the various fictions of film and detective novels, we would expect to see a double of the ballet of the street, an illicit swarm of criminals busily going about the fascinating depravity of their daily activities. Or perhaps we expect to see the grotesquely mutated bodies of a million flushed exotic pets writhing with a novel and monstrous vitality. In either case, the hidden maze of the sewer serves as the imaginary stage for transgressive fantasies. They are the sites in which the imaginary excess of desire is deposited. The dense network of sewers and service tunnels that pulsates just below the spectral skin of the city exists as a nostalgic remnant of the labyrinth, the first architectural object. Like the labyrinth, this abject site, concealed in the bowels of the city, seems to hide a fragment of the Minotaur, the paradigmatic symbol of a form of life that should not be, the abomination of the uncontainable and unthinking desire of the unconscious. The Minotaur, unlike the centaur and the satyr, shares none of man’s nobility precisely because its head is bestial; the labyrinth conceals the shame of Minos. Much like the labyrinth, the sewer conceals a lower and shameful aspect of life. It is the site of a perpetual and compulsive expulsion, but the expulsion is always already incomplete. It contains the shame of the body’s “base” functions, but it is incapable of eliminating these functions altogether. Despite all of the intricacies of containment, filtration, and treatment, there is still waste and contamination.

One could ask at this point what exactly we are advocating here. Are we suggesting that waste management is unnecessary or somehow outdated and archaic? Far from it; our purpose here is not to critique one form of sanitation or another but rather to find an approach that enables us to analyze the role of desire in the processes and structures of sanitation. Desire becomes evident at the point at which the demand for sanitation extends beyond the need for it (Lacan, 1977). This desire is, as Lacan (1998a) argues, a relation not to an object, but to a lack. It is the desire to close the gap that is constitutive of subjectivity and, by extension, the city; it is the desire for an ideal city and the ideal form of life that it promises to contain. It is the desire for this “ideal” that compels the subject to designate a form of life that is a “waste” and to thus extend the contamination of the sewer by associating it with areas of human waste and “bare” life, but despite all efforts to contain and sterilize, a gap remains within the image of the “good” life. This gap is concentrated in particular sites within the urban fabric, but it is distributed throughout the body of the city like a vestigial fragment of genetic code floating just below the ordered surface of replication (Lacan, 1977). These contaminated sites open up the possibility of a psychoanalytic approach to the built environment. As Stallybrass and White (1986) suggest, “One cannot analyse the psychic domain without examining the processes of transcoding between the body, topography and the social formation” (p. 144), but does this analysis have an end? Is there an end to urban analysis, and if so, how is it different than the pathological diagnosis that the utopian project offers us?
There is an essentially modern tragic symbol: it is a sort of large wheel which is spinning and which is no longer steered by a hand.


At this point in our analysis, we can summarize our position with a general proposition: Architecture begins with shame. It is the expression of a desire to situate or localize what is shameful, to contain it, refine it, and ultimately escape it. It is the simultaneous articulation of shame and desire. As such, architecture shares its birth with that of the ego. It begins with the paradoxical recognition that “I, as I now am, am incomplete.” This recognition or, as Lacan (1988a) refers to it, misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) marks the beginning of what could be referred to as the ego’s neurotic adventure (p. 167). The subject, as the “I,” or ego, begins this journey when it recognizes that it is not at home in the world as it is. Architecture is the means through which the subject begins to make itself at home. This process, the process of building a final, or complete, home, a utopia, begins with the distinction between the “good” life and the life that is, paradoxically, not a life—the life that is denied the quality of living, “bare” life. The first architectural artifact is thus the *cordon sanitaire*; it is the decisive urban archetype, that is, the material articulation of a logic that lies at the foundation of the city. As Agamben (1998) observes in *Homo Sacer*, it is the exclusion of the inessential, or “bare,” life that “founds the city of men” (p. 7). Under this light, we can read the expulsion of the Minotaur as an expression of this logic. The Minotaur, unlike its mythological cousins the centaur or satyr, possesses the head of an animal and the body of a man, and as such it represents an entirely unredeemable form of life, a life void of reason, a “bare” life. Architecture provides the solution to the problem of the Minotaur in the form of the labyrinth (Gantz, 1993, pp. 260-263). The role of this prototypical architectural object is to exclude and through exclusion to define what “man” is not or, at the very least, must not be. This negation dialectically implies an affirmation; by defining what “man” is not, it becomes possible to begin to define what “he” is. The ironic destiny of this neurotic adventure, this quest for a home, for the “good” life, is that it begins by excluding, by defining what it is not, but it cannot leave this “bare” life behind. The city and the civilized form of life that it fosters is defined by the form of life that it rejects, but this “bare” life is not outside of the city’s walls, not beyond the pale, or at least not only; rather, it lies at the very foundation of the city. “Bare” life is, in short, the shadow of the “good” life. It is its constant and necessary companion, and in this capacity it grants the “good” life form, but paradoxically, due to the constant presence of this shadow, the form of the “good” life is incomplete and is thus subject to doubt.

There is an essential link between the topography of the city and the psychological topology of the subjects it contains; it could be said that the topology of the subject is inscribed into the material form of the city. The social body takes shape within the city; its material structure gives form to the “good” life by exposing the “bare” life that contaminates the subject. The city is animated by the subject’s neurotic desire to be complete, to be at home, and thus it remains in a dynamic state of tension. To parody the famous Lacanian formula, “The [city] is structured like a language” (1993, p. 167). In
this way, perhaps we can revisit Rossi’s (1984) suggestion that we can approach the city “from another perspective, by penetrating it in a more familiar, more visible—even if no longer rational—way” and derive a method that enslaves “science through the use of weapons borrowed from it, by making it itself produce the paralogisms that limit it” (p. 107; Bataille, 2001, p. 81). Architecture, or at least the architecture that seeks to define the “good” life, the architecture that is driven by the neurotic desire for utopia, has been, up to this point, a misadventure. It has promised an answer to the question of existence, but all that it has offered is an image of what life must not be, of what must be condemned or contained. This promise, the promise of urbanization, has not brought us any closer to answering the question of identity; it has simply obscured the nature of the problem by presenting metonymy as progress toward utopia.

Yet perhaps there can be another possibility for architecture, a possibility that has been anticipated in the work of Bataille. For Bataille (2001), this moment is when man seeks to represent himself, no longer as a moment of a homogeneous process—of a necessary and pitiful process—but as a new laceration within a lacerated nature, it is no longer the levelling phraseology coming to him from the understanding that can help him: he can no longer recognize himself in the degrading chains of logic, but he recognizes himself, instead—not only with rage but in ecstatic torment—in the virulence of his own phantasms. (p. 80)

The city is a collective material representation of a claim to being that is not yet; it is a material reflection of the neurotic subject or, in Bataille’s (2001) terms, the “lacerated” subject. This split or divide within the nature of the subject and the alienation that it brings is built into the structure of the city, and as such the city can be seen “in a more familiar, more visible—even if no longer rational—way” through the gaze of the analysand (Rossi, 1984, p. 107). The aim of this gaze is not to transfer a new projection over the analysand, not to offer a new utopian image, but rather to expose the distance between the identity that is affirmed and the one that is negated (Lacan, 1998a). In other words, this approach to urban analysis would be psychoanalytic in the Lacanian sense. As such, the focus would not be the formulation of a stable and universal utopian image, not to offer a teleological solution to the question of existence, but rather to explore the consequences of this question. Such an analysis would begin with abject urban sites precisely because these sites serve to maintain, or at least attempt to maintain, the distance between the “good” life and “bare” life. In these sites, the gap between need and demand is widest, and thus desire is concentrated. By opening the question of the gap between the subject and the object of desire (objet petit a) or between the city and its utopian counterpart, desire, the desire to possess the object, to be complete, or “happy,” becomes an ethical question (Lacan, 1997). This question problematizes both the divisions between the “good” life and the “bare” life and the logic that maintains these divisions. An example of this type of logic is the discourse of sanitization.

While sanitation is undeniably a necessity of urban life, the demand for it extends far beyond the biological need; the need for sanitation is conflated with the moral demand for purity. There is a desire for sanitation, and it is this desire that guides More’s separation of the city and the abattoir. It is not only the filthy blood and refuse that the utopians reject but the very act of slaughter. In More’s (1992) account,

Fish, meat, and poultry are also brought there [the marketplace] from designated places outside the city, where running water can carry away all the blood and refuse. Slaves do the slaughtering and cleaning of these places: citizens are not allowed to do such work.

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The Utopians feel that slaughtering our fellow-creatures gradually destroys the sense of compassion, which is the finest sentiment of which our human nature is capable. (p. 42)

Here, the rational for the separation of the city and the abattoir extends beyond the practical concerns of biological sanitation. It is not simply a concern for the hazardous properties of blood and refuse but the moral affectivity of the act of slaughtering animals. It is curious that this concern does not extend to the killing of rebellious slaves. “Slaves, moreover, are permanent and visible reminders that crime does not pay. If the slaves rebel against their condition, then, like savage beasts which neither bars nor chains can tame, they are put instantly to death” (More, 1992, p. 62). The rebellious slave is described as a “savage beast,” yet, unlike the animals that are slaughtered for sale in the Utopian markets, the killing of the rebellious slave does not “destroy the sense of compassion” (p. 42). As More notes, these slaves are “put instantly to death,” but oddly no place of execution is described. The text is rich with details concerning everything from the general topography of the island to the spatial displacement of the most minute details of the Utopian’s lives, but he mentions no scaffold or stake. He leaves us with the barest of facts: Execution, as the ultimate form of punishment, takes place; it happens, but paradoxically this event occurs without place. This lack of place immediately draws the reader’s attention and brings to mind a series of questions: Why does sanitation, in both the moral and biological sense, become a concern with regards to the slaughtering of animals but not of slaves? Do slaves die bloodless deaths? Who kills them, and where is it done? How do executions affect the moral character of the executioners? It is obvious that the executions require a designated site in Utopia, but this site is omitted from the text, and due to its omission, it is a prime example of an abject site.

Urban analysis must begin with the abject site precisely because it is omitted, and this omission is symptomatic of the neurosis that is folded into the logical processes of the urban project. This analysis begins at the linkage between the need for sanitation and the demand for cleanliness; more specifically, it centers on the distance between the two, on the desire for purity and the “good” form of life that coincides with it. If, as Rossi (1984) argues, “the city is as irrational as any work of art,” then perhaps the exposure of this irrationality, “in the secret and ceaseless will of its collective manifestations,” will open up the possibility of substituting laughter for shame in architecture (p. 163). In Bataille’s (2001) words,

Laughter intervenes in these value determinations of being as the expression of the circuit of movements of attraction across the human field. It manifests itself each time a change in level suddenly occurs: it characterizes all vacant lives as ridiculous. A kind of incandescent joy—the explosive and sudden revelation of the presence of being—is liberated each time a striking appearance is contracted with its absence, with the human void. Laughter casts a glance, charged with the mortal violence of being, into the void of life. (p. 176)

The aim is thus not to efface the undecidability that is contained in the heart of the architectural project—to strive for some dislocated promise of Being that is nowhere to be found—but to revisit the object(s) of shame and derision, to see them from a different angle, under a different light, almost as if for the first time, with a touch of levity and a glance of laughter. After all, laughter both precedes and founds the labyrinth; how could anything else have guided the hands of the master architect when he set to work designing and building Pasiphae’s device (Gantz, 1993, pp. 260-263)?
References


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