INTRODUCTION

Modern Surface and Postmodern Simulation
A Retrospective Retrieval

Denn was innen, das ist außen!
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

AGENDAS OF SURFACE AND SIMULACRUM

It is in our time that the Enlightenment project has reached its ultimate implosion. In visual terms, the twentieth century of the western hemisphere will be remembered as the century in which content yielded to form, text to image, depth to façade, and Sein to Schein. For over a hundred years, mass cultural phenomena have been growing in importance, taking over from elite structures of cultural expression to become sites where real power resides, and dominating ever more surely our social imaginary. As reflections of the processes of capitalist industrialization in forms clad for popular consumption, these manifestations are literal and conceptual expressions of surface: they promote external appearance to us in such arenas as architecture, advertising, film, and fashion. Located as we are at the outset of the new millennium, some may recognize with trepidation that mass culture is becoming so wedded to highly orchestrated and intrusive electronic formats that there seems to be less and less opportunity for any creative maieutics, or participatory “wiggle room.” Modernity’s surfaces, entirely site-and-street-specific yet mobile and mobilizing, have been replaced by the stasis of the fluid mobility granted to our perception by the technologies of television, the VCR, the World Wide Web, and virtual reality.

Perhaps as a result of this underlying discomfort, we appear to have a case of what Fredric Jameson has called “inverted millenarianism”: rather than look forward at future developments, we choose, almost apotropai-
cally, to look back at how mass culture emerged in the first place. In other words, postmodernity is living up to its name and engaging in a serious bout of nostalgia for modernity. Our culture of the copy without original, that is, of the “simulacrum” or the “hyperreal”—as the most extreme prophet of postmodern neocapitalism, Jean Baudrillard, has adapted Plato’s term—induces us, quite naturally, to feel a nostalgia for the real. We turn, then, from our technologized surface culture to look not for metaphysical origins but for a time when surface played a different, more dynamic, meaningful role in mass cultural formation.

We do not, indeed, have to look far. Germany of the 1920s offers us a stunning moment in modernity when surface values first ascended to become determinants of taste, activity, and occupation—a scene of functioning that shows us there was in fact a time when the new was not yet old, modernity was still modern, and spectacle was still spectacular. Certain arenas of Weimar urban spectacle revalorized surface as the dominant “social space” of the era, to use Henri Lefebvre’s phrase. It would not be an exaggeration to claim for the culture (or cult) of surface in 1920s Germany the status of the visual embodiment of the modern per se. In order to recapture this spirit of the Weimar modern—both as material condition (modernity) and as aesthetic output (modernism)—it is first necessary to traverse back through the current condition of the “overexposure and transparence of the world,” to cite Baudrillard, toward a time when exposure and transparency first offered themselves as emancipatory advances.

Rather than dismiss modernist practice for being—despite its avant-gardistic focus on surface as the predominant generator of cultural activity—perpetually in depth-seeking error and in search of transformative social hope that postmodernism has long since cynically eclipsed in some undefinably superior way, I find enormous value in examining the tangible perceptual ways in which the modern era is still part of our own. I propose, then, that we reenact the surface terrain of Weimar Germany as one of the most dazzling examples of the modern period and reassess it according to its own merits. While nonetheless admitting that the gate to the immediate contemporariness of modernity is forever closed to us, located as we are within a later historical era, I believe there are more ways to understand the modern era than exclusively through the postmodern lens of recording modernity’s representational and conceptual shortcomings; similarly, postmodernist thought cannot, in all intellectual honesty, continue to use modernity to define itself along authoritative lines. A postmodernism that purifies itself from the modernist pursuit of pure form is only engaging in a new kind of epistemological error. Instead, it is the interconnectedness
between the visual codes of these historical and political alternative cultures that draws us like moths to the Weimar flame.

Most crucially, what attracts the contemporary mind to these years is the basic sense of (self-)recognition: for so much of today’s electronically simulational environment was literally in vitro during the high points of Western modernity’s “culture of momentum.” A close attention to Weimar is of particular value as an ongoing “bridging” scenario between modernism and postmodernism: Weimar can be seen as the singular era of transition from the modern to the postmodern. In key ways, Weimar design initiated our current state of saturation regarding the visual codes of consumerism. Our contemporary relation to the visual culture of the German 1920s is therefore much closer than we might think, even as we exaggerate and intensify its political and aesthetic trajectories. Hence what is needed is not a reclamation of modernity as any contemporary alternative to postmodernity; the more interesting endeavor lies in a reengagement with those modern elements that still underpin postmodern expression.

The spectacularization of consumerist display contained the germination of surface culture’s emergence as a powerful conceptual and exterior entity, which Guy Debord dates as occurring in the mid-1920s. Debord’s study *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) was written within the Marxist artistic movement of the Situationist International in France (1957–1972); in it, he offers a devastating critique of the (American, “diffused”—as opposed to Soviet, “concentrated”) spectacle as the con of consumerism and the dominant Weltanschauung of modernity and postmodernity alike. Even though Debord’s student-protest-era reaction against consumptionism has retrospectively been dubbed “paranoid,” or as “Adorno gone mad,” or at best a “lone voice of virtue and ethics in a corrupt world,” he remains a clear inspiration for current (and especially for Baudrillard’s) theories about how postmodern society actually functions. And, despite Michel Foucault’s attempt to guide us away from Debord (“Our society is not one of spectacle but of surveillance”), the latter’s theory illuminates how the spectacle, as the twentieth-century’s visual codification of consumption, is a true descendant of modernity’s homogenizing Benthamite panopticon.

Debord recognizes how today’s panoramically soaked “spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image,” a condition that was made acute by the fact that “commodities are now all that there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity.” His most pathbreaking insight, and one that Baudrillard subsequently builds upon, is that commodity aesthetics is no longer a cover for any deeper meaning, but has
become the only option for capitalistic representation, that is, both signifier and signified unite/collapse in an entirely totalizing sense:

[The spectacle] is not something added to the real world—not a decorative element, so to speak. On the contrary, it is the very heart of society’s real unreality. . . . It is the omnipresent celebration of a choice already made in the sphere of production, and the consummate result of that choice. In form as in content the spectacle serves as total justification for the conditions and aims of the existing system.14

Writing on the eve of electronic interfaces with modern surfaces, Debord presents an all-out condemnation of how our spectacular society represents to itself, in the guise of the parade of the “autonomous image,” only nonmemory, antihistory, death, deceit, control, and the “autonomous movement of non-life”:15

Understood on its own terms, the spectacle proclaims the predominance of appearances and asserts that all human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearance. But any critique capable of apprehending the spectacle’s essential character must expose it as a visible negation of life—and as a negation of life that has invented a visual form for itself.16

For Debord, then, the spectacle, as a spirally negative source of self-reflexivity, is the very furthest from the visual pleasure of consumer freedom that it appears to be.

Baudrillard, removing the tragic tone from Debord’s analysis even as he remains entirely indebted to the latter’s thesis, finds that electronic technology has enacted ineradicable perceptual shifts on the spectacle. There is now no more “surface” in the modern sense; there is no more distinction between depth/shadow on the one hand and that which is situated above or outside, because there is no more “original.” Surface culture has become so endemic and our contact with the phenomenal world so permanently mediated that all we have left is an environment of simulation in which even warfare appears more real as a signifier than as an actual event, thanks to (say) the media coverage of the Gulf War of 1991.17 This state of displacement from the experiential real to the mediated hyperreal is so acute that the Three Mile Island nuclear accident happened, Baudrillard suggests, as much as a contagious reflection of the film The China Syndrome as of anything else, since “it is simulation that is effective, never the real.”18 This is the point that Jameson also makes in his assessment of the late capitalist era that has been witness to an “emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal
sense”—a paradigm that no longer even cares to ask dialectical questions about “essence and appearance.”

Baudrillard’s rather deterministic vision of the shift from modernity to postmodernity gains self-supporting strength from his emphasis on that epochal break at which, along the post-WWII continuum of exponential growth in communications technologies, the spectacle becomes what Baudrillard refers to as the hyperreal without a site-specific referent. Baudrillard points, with thinly disguised relish, to the pornographic ecstasy of our latter condition:

[Modern] consumer society lived... under the sign of alienation, as a society of the spectacle. But just so: as long as there is alienation, there is spectacle, action, scene. It is not obscenity—the spectacle is never obscene. Obscenity begins precisely when there is no more spectacle, no more scene, when all becomes transparence and immediate visibility, when everything is exposed to the harsh and inexorable light of information and communication.

There is now only surface as postmodern simulation, rather than modern stimulation: an invasion of electronic imagery into all things, a “forced extroversion of all interiority” that is our postmodern condition—in short, a perversion of surface culture. We have killed off our amazement at spectacle in situ in much the same way as we previously killed off God (according to Friedrich Nietzsche, in an excess of rationalism): we have developed technologies that turn the display button to an eternal “on,” and in the Global Village there is no difference left between public and private, outer and inner space. There is nothing more to show—no more desire for spectacle in the modernist sense of the word—because we are always constantly displaying all. What we have instead “is the obscenity of the visible, of the all-too-visible, of the more-visible-than-the-visible,” as Baudrillard effusively claims.

How, then, can we best explain the gap between these bleak contemporary fin-de-millennium configurations of surface and the early twentieth-century celebratory “primal scene” of the same? In defining the modern, Ernst Bloch’s “synchronicity of the non-synchronous” or “contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous” (Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen) is often applied, a phrase whose spatio-temporal sense of crisis initially appears at odds with any timely celebration of the new. But, as social historians of Weimar Germany like Detlev Peukert and Peter Fritz-sche have noted, it is precisely out of post-WWI Germany’s highly uneven landscape of modernization that such creative intensity of cultural change
(and belief in cultural changeability) also emerged. In defining the postmodern, we find instead an ostensible emphasis on celebration, but not coupled with any motivating Blochian sense of contradictory urgency: this causeless playfulness tires quickly. The “key words” of modernity have been updated to appear like mere pastiches of the old (that is, modern): industrialized capitalism has become postindustrial late capitalism; surface, simulation; visible electricity, invisible electronics; film, channel-surfing (or surfing the Web); real place, virtual reality; political engagement, deconstructionist play (or now, its latest form, socially conscious cultural studies). In a state of exhaustion, the modernist new has passed over into what counts as the traditions of postmodernism: Jameson states that the writings of Marcel Proust and the designs of Frank Lloyd Wright, once revolutionary, are now canonical. Media theorist Norbert Bolz tries to put a positive spin on this shift:

Modernity was an organized distrust of the senses. Today we are told by depthless surfaces to trust our senses again. The modernist insight went into depth, was revelatory, and tore off the veil from appearances—today we search for the meaning of surface on the surface. That is why we are changing our style of perception: instead of reaching into the depths, we are surfing on the crests of the waves.

Bolz appears to replicate Marshall McLuhan’s vision for the role of electronic media in the postmodern age. Nonetheless our era has produced, for the most part, not McLuhan’s sought-after postvisual, electronically alert and interactive “extended” human being, but rather a visually overdependent, stimuli-deadened, debt-laden mass consumer.

There is more going on here than just an epistemic dualism of modernist past and postmodernist present: material, technological and perceptual differences notwithstanding, we find ourselves today in a state of exchange referred to by the sociologist Mike Featherstone as the “trans-modern.” The creative complexities of the Weimar modern provide us, of course, with an important case-in-point. Of this “both/and” aspect Susan Buck-Morss has stated:

Modernism and postmodernism are not chronological eras, but political positions in the century-long struggle between art and technology. If modernism expresses utopian longing by anticipating the reconciliation of social function and aesthetic form, postmodernism acknowledges their nonidentity and keeps fantasy alive. Each position thus represents a partial truth; each will recur anew, so long as the contradictions of commodity society are not overcome.
Because the contradictions of our involvement with consumerism continue to deepen along sociopolitical lines, the postmodern voice should not automatically claim that modernity has by now been emptied out. Perhaps we would do better to hope, along with the (unfashionably modernist) voice of Jürgen Habermas, that on some levels at least “the project of modernity has not yet been fulfilled” (significantly, for Habermas, in the direction of an era beyond that of postmodernity).  

Adopting the notion of the “trans-modern,” the following chapters redress the balance so that the many voices of aesthetic and intellectual modernism, as well as the myriad material facets of everyday life in modernity, are not drowned out by a postmodern revisionism that seeks (even if inadvertently) to reduce all of the modern in a supererogatory gesture to something that on some fundamental level “led to” the Holocaust, Stalinism, and Hiroshima. Jacques Derrida perhaps overeagerly assumes an end to modernity’s “domination” agenda with the advent of postmodernity: such claims aside, the entire project of modernity is not going to be leveled off as a false construction to which postmodernity usefully provides a clever deconstruction. Miriam Hansen warns against enacting such reductionism, lest the postmodern critic slide into the same conceptual “totalitarianism” that (s)he is trying to replace:

The critical fixation on hegemonic modernism to some extent undercuts the effort to open up the discussion of modernism from the traditional preoccupation with artistic and intellectual movements and to understand the latter as inseparable from the political, economic, and social processes of modernity and modernization, including the development of mass and media culture. In other words, the attack on hegemonic modernism tends to occlude the material conditions of everyday modernity which distinguish living in the twentieth century from living in the nineteenth, at least for large populations in western Europe and the United States.

This is why Hansen calls for inquiry that seeks to “reconstruct the liberatory appeal of the ‘modern’ for a mass public—a public that was itself both product and casualty of the modernization process.” This book is a response to such a call.

Linked to Hansen’s antitotalitarian call for fresh approaches to the study of modernity is my focus on visuality. Evidently, the study of Weimar German mass cultural phenomena runs in its emotional core somewhat against the grain of the anti-graven-image (Bilderverbot) inheritance of Frankfurt School theory. We would do well to remind ourselves that the
postwar influence of the Frankfurt School has had, since Nazism, an understandably problematic effect on the study of visual culture per se. This often unacknowledged nervousness before “graven images” must not lead primary sources of visuality to be regarded peremptorily as symptoms of capitalist social disease in need of ideologically informed dialectical redemption. Nor has this rejection of images been limited to the German intellectual sphere: in *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (1993), Martin Jay has delineated French linguistic resistance to ocular metaphoricity in general, a trend that occurred in precise conjunction with ocularity’s cultural ascendance.

My study, then, is couched within what W. J. T. Mitchell has termed the “pictorial turn,” and provides the reader with an unabashed entrée to Weimar Germany’s visual plethora of historiographical-cum-aesthetic symbols of everyday life, to be studied in their own right. I seek to retrieve the consumerist spectacle of Weimar German visual modernity on primarily *asymp-tomatic* terms—not always as a proto-Nazi illness or just plain old capitalist “false consciousness,” the manifestations of which are thus eternally in error, but instead as a cultural blueprint of visual life that shows us where our images today have come from. This approach also highlights where our images have journeyed—into postmodernism’s subsequent transformation of modern street-based surface into electronically based simulation. Modernity’s obsession with and representations of surface may yet surprise us, if found to contain a greater degree of conceptual clarity (and even playful joy) than is presently the case in postmodern versions of the same. Despite this book’s return to modernity through the use of New Historicist tactics applied to visual history, it does not engage in a mere duplication of non-self-reflexive positivism: rather, Weimar visuality is resurrected here more as a “communal creation” of then and now, of constantly interacting aesthetic, social, political, filmic, architectural, and economic discourses. My scholarly intention here is a balance of historiography that Jean Starobinski defined, and Martin Jay more recently advocates, as one that touches both a panoramic perspective (*le regard surplombant*) as well as a more intimate, ground-level, close-up gaze. This hermeneutically double approach of applying philosophical and social theory to open up contextual source texts can be understood as a combination of theoretical with archival study.

WEIMAR SURFACES NOW

In what can be for our eyes a refreshing respite from today’s infinitely variable, unstable, and hence often confusingly schizophrenic hybridity of
products and clientele, the style and visual effects of Weimar Germany operated as a significantly streamlined phenomenon. The sites of surface in the German 1920s were aestheticizations of function. They were the latest in artistic design and yet served the everyday public, and were very much part of the industrial economy of the era, having been built up along the model of the new industrial technologies’ production lines. Taylorism and Fordism’s demiurgic principles of infinite expansion and efficiency—techniques that determined the predominant system of labor, products, and capital for most of the twentieth century—were adhered to in Weimar Germany with a unique fanaticism born of a collective need to repair wounded nationhood in the wake of the humiliations of the Treaty of Versailles and the ensuing loss of colonial and military strength. Fordist-Taylorist focus on the machine climaxed particularly in the context of the relative wealth of the Weimar Republic’s economic “stabilization” or “boom” years, after the inflation crisis of November 1923 and before the Wall Street crash of October 25, 1929. As David Harvey comments, conceptions and practices of space and time change according to a knife-edged capitalist dialectic, such that “capitalism perpetually strives . . . to create a social and physical landscape in its own image and requisite to its own needs at a particular point in time, only just as certainly to undermine, disrupt and even destroy that landscape at a later point in time.” In this way, the cult of surface was hewn out of Weimar Germany for a period during the mid-1920s, so as to reflect modernity’s idealized self-image back to itself.

Consequently, it is not at all coincidental that in the relative boom phase of 1924–1929, Weimar society enjoyed a concomitant upswing in architectural output that entirely matched the economic philosophy of this period. Known as functionalism or Neue Sachlichkeit (New Sobriety or New Objectivity) and operative not just in architecture but also in all areas of design, art, and photography, the new constructivist-realist focus replaced expressionism’s rough, religious warmth with smooth, logical coolness. New Objectivity’s “nonstyle,” or rejection of decorative style, constitutes this century’s most concentrated systematization of surface, and has become one of European modernism’s best-known visual codes. Its discursive figures include such terms as “façade culture,” “glamour,” “asphalt,” and “surface” (Fassadenkultur, Glanz, Asphalt, Oberfläche), which appeared repeatedly in the media and literature of the era to describe the modern urban, commercial experience. Moreover, the intensity of people’s conception of the city was amplified by the fact that, due to the Wilhelmine era’s intense industrialization, Weimar Berlin was the world’s third largest city (after New York and London), its population rising to 4.24 million.
Thus entering the “roaring twenties” with bravado, Berlin acquired the position of industrial and cultural leadership over the rest of interwar Europe. The capital was host to 2.5 million workers, or ten percent of all those working in Weimar Germany. By 1929, more than one in four of the total population of 64.4 million Germans lived in cities of more than one hundred thousand.

Evidence of Weimar Germany’s New Objectivist “surface” style was inscribed most strongly in the following ways: the transformation induced by modern architecture and the latter’s relation to parallel metamorphoses in fashion; the interrelation of outdoor electric advertising with the city street; the evolution of the Weimar film industry, with its movie palaces and film set designs as the respective extrinsic and intrinsic “surfaces” of German silent cinema; and the display of actual commodities in shrinelike store display windows. These, then, are the various topos, the literal surface areas, that form the subjects of the four ensuing chapters in this book—namely, the radical social and aesthetic changes invoked by modern architecture in Weimar Germany, and its relation to the fashion of the New Woman (chapter one); the new architectural spatiality and human sensory perception inspired by electric advertising (chapter two); Weimar cinema as architectural event, both in film production and film reception (chapter three); and the function of the display window as a nexus of Weimar consumerism (chapter four).

Thus each chapter that follows is indicative of how in the middle years of the Weimar Republic there emerged a marked celebration of surface culture in everyday urban life. In these chapters’ Geertzian “thick descriptions” of surface, where the topographies of high and low culture become almost seamlessly enmeshed, the joint aim is a cross-sectional hermeneutics of Weimar society—a spatial freeze-frame of surface phenomena as they developed during the New Objectivity years of 1924 to 1929. In an intersecting series of collations of surface phenomena produced during the stabilization years, I present here a synchronically based iconology of the German mid-1920s, in order to relocate and re-present that short, even fragile, period of “stable” creative output during which Weimar visual culture was at its most stunning and most sustained.

Only in Weimar Germany did modernity’s cult of surface extend uniformly into all visual fields and come to dominate cultural and business production so simultaneously and so distinctively. How and when, then, was Weimar urban spectacle expressed? A useful preliminary exercise in this regard is to chronicle a selection of events that are characteristic of the speed of German interwar modernization, in order to gain a sense of the
actual “trope” of mid-Weimar surface culture. The Weimar surface era first developed, however, through the U.S.-assisted economic recovery after the inflation of 1923—the year that Henry Ford’s autobiography was translated into German and became, as Jost Hermand and Frank Trommler term it, the “bible of the Weimar stabilization epoch.” In 1924, the Rentenmark was able to stabilize postinflation currency, the Bubikopf (page boy) hairstyle for women was introduced to Germany from France, and the first part of the Berlin railway was electrified. One year later, the effect of the Dawes Plan took hold and a steep escalation of visually oriented modernization events began: the year witnessed, for example, the opening of the Osram electric company’s “House of Light” (Osram-Lichthaus) in Berlin, for research into electricity; the prominent installation of the very first “traffic tower” (Verkehrsturm), the predecessor of the traffic light, at Berlin’s Potsdamer Platz, Europe’s busiest intersection; the first escalator in Germany at the Tietz department store on the nearby Leipziger Straße; the advertising journal Seidels Reklame marking its first quarter-century of promoting the German advertising industry; the Ford Motor Company’s first opening of a German subsidiary; the American dancer Josephine Baker’s arrival in Berlin; the opening of Weimar Berlin’s premiere movie theater, the Ufa-Palast-am-Zoo; Eugen Schüfftan perfecting his trick effect of mirrors for use in filmic architecture (the “Schüfftan-technique”); the display window competition “Then and Now” (Einst und Jetzt) in Berlin; the popularization of the Charleston dance; the founding of the first German national window dressers’ guild (Bund der Schaufensterdekorateure Deutschlands); and dozens of exhibitions in Berlin, of, for example, automobiles, shoes, clothing, furniture, radio, hotels, film and photography, and “hygiene.”

This incredible pace of production and display was maintained during 1926, the year of several key beginnings, such as those of the Berlin exhibition area with its new radio tower; the movie theaters Gloria-Palast and Capitol opposite the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church (Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche), marking the completion of the cinema area in central Berlin; Parufamet, the German-American film treaty in which the United States bailed out Ufa, the Universal Film-Aktiengesellschaft; and, most radically, Walter Gropius’s ultrafunctionalist Bauhaus building in Dessau (fig. 1). In 1927, the Weissenhof Housing Project (Weissenhofsiedlung), organized by the German Werkbund, opened in Stuttgart. 1928 was famous for such technological events as the “Berlin in Light” (Berlin im Licht) week, followed by electric display weeks in other German cities; the Mercedes Benz eight-cylinder automobile, which was billed as the “biggest
event of the year”; and the Zeppelin airship that flew across Berlin and then on to the U.S.—events the like of which were responsible for the trade journal *AEG-Mitteilungen* doubling the length of its issues during that year. By 1929 (the ten-year anniversary of the signing of the Weimar Republic’s constitution, and the last expansionist year before the onset of economic depression after the Great Crash), the Berlin railway had been fully electrified; the rebuilding of Berlin’s Alexanderplatz was finally completed; the Karstadt department store opened in Berlin-Neukölln; Ufa built its first sound studios at Neubabelsberg; and Germany’s largest movie palace, the Ufa-Palast in Hamburg (with 2,667 seats), was opened.

The heterogeneous events of the above chronicle of Weimar surface culture during the New Objectivity years all reflect the rise of a pervasive urban spirit. *Tempo*, or being constantly “on the go,” was not just the name
of these surface times—although in 1929 it literally became a German brand name (for pocket paper tissues, appropriately enough). The pattern emerging from these “exterior” events entirely matched an “interior” rise of antimimesis in aesthetic modernism, which signified an abrupt end to the dominance of realism in art and writing during the nineteenth century. For the art historian Clement Greenberg, archchronicler of modern art’s shift toward the abstract, it was the new focus on visuality as pure, “flat” form that was taking industrial society’s obsession with surface one vital step further toward aesthetic iconoclasm. This was the case with cubism’s self-predication on the eye as the sole verifying agent that could see mechanically in the manner of aerial photography (just developed in World War I)—a mode of vision by which, stated Greenberg, the “world was stripped of its surface, of its skin, and the skin was spread flat on the flatness of the picture plane.” Because, however, modernist thought was both obsessed with and repelled by visuality’s rapid expansion into the social imaginary, modernism was also host to an uncomfortable rivalry between visuality and textuality, resulting in a schizoid (antimimetic) condition of representation. As Jay points out in *Downcast Eyes*, modernism brought with it not just a scopic fascination but also its opposite, namely “visual spleen as well as visual euphoria.”

This tension within aesthetic modernism helps form an interesting feedback loop for Weimar modernity’s surface images, mirroring and influencing the desires of the urban masses on the street. In the German 1920s, the lines between the world of business and the world of the avant-garde become at times more than blurred: to adopt Jay’s terms for visuality’s role in modernism, it is increasingly impossible to differentiate between a purportedly avant-gardistic “ocularphobia” at work in high culture and a surface-oriented “ocularcentrism” operating in popular culture. Instead, we find in the Weimar years continual crossovers in art and architecture between artist and society—the Bauhaus sought to realize its mission in applied arts for the masses, such as deornamentalized typography, kitchen units and other mass-produced furniture, chinaware, and utensils, while architects like Erich Mendelsohn or Hans Poelzig built some of their most radical designs for the display needs of consumerism and the film industry. Similarly, applied arts like advertising were entirely adept at using those same formal shock techniques of visual crisis that were also the trademark of modernist writing, art and film. Modernist representations, then, as both afterimages and prophecies of industrialization, dared to draw new polysemous distinctions, the bold preconditions for the postmodernist epigenesis to come.
Modern urban surface culture was experienced as an outdoor “reading” of the city’s commercial life force, namely the street. These streets of surface in which zones of business, dwelling, advertising, and entertainment all simultaneously coexisted and intermingled were naturally located in the city center. City centers like New York, London, Rome, and Paris vied with each other for “world-city” status. Berlin, likewise, was an active competitor: “Everyone once in Berlin” was the bid of a tourism slogan about the German capital, and a tourist poster circa 1929 declared that “Germany Wants To See You.” But the world financial markets of the postwar years have since brought about a tectonic shift of urban identities away from their heterogeneous sites of modernity, and toward what social theorist Saskia Sassen has determined to be a far more streamlined postmodern condition of globalization. In *The Global City* (1991) and *Cities in a World Economy* (1994), Sassen shows us how modernity’s streets of flânerie—which were located in the metropolis, itself in turn the main showplace of the nation-state—have since given way to an erosion of national borders and new transnational market spaces, at least in certain selected cities like New York, London and Tokyo, whose financial markets guide the world economy and out of which worldwide corporations are headquartered. The global city, according to Sassen, is still governed by the rules of agglomeration and centralization, but it has more in common with its interrelated sister global cities than it does with its own host nation. Sassen therefore takes issue with the doomsayers of the urban in postmodern times, pointing out that globalization has not, after all, resulted in total decentralization of power out of the city. From the *Weltstadt* of modernity, we have thus reached the global city of postmodernity.

Despite Sassen’s compelling depiction of the global city’s role within the new world economy, we need to account for the modern street experience’s demise in the contemporary metropolis. Here we can refer to French theorist Paul Virilio, who, in “The Overexposed City” (1984), investigates how we have lost the immediacy of street apperception that was so vital to the culture of 1920s Berlin or New York. “Does the greater metropolis still have a façade?” he asks, in the sense of a socio-spatial façade providing a break, boundary, or “urban wall” between the intramural metropolitan area and that which is outside the city. The answer, in Virilio’s dystopic vision, is no. Suburbia has denuded the city’s street-fronts of their modern discursivity. Worse yet: electronic transparency is replacing the traditional opacity of buildings’ surfaces to the extent that we are “no longer ever in
front of the city but always inside it”55; there is only the “interfaçade of monitors and control screens.”55 In the computer age, continues Virilio, there is a loss of urban tactility, and the “architectonic element begins to drift”; “urban space” has lost its “geographical reality.”56 Here, Virilio is transferring to the spatial logic of the city Baudrillard’s thesis of the postmodern “ecstasy of communication,” where a “nonreflecting surface, an immanent surface where operations unfold” has replaced the Platonic “mirror and scene.”57 As Baudrillard also states of the new virtual urban condition: “To grasp... [the] secret [of America], you should not then begin with the city and move inwards toward a screen; you should begin with the screen and move outwards towards the city.”58 But unlike Baudrillard’s ambiguous poetics, Virilio’s vision of the contemporary-futuristic metropolis, where the new production mode of “interface man/machine replaces the façades of buildings and the surfaces of ground on which they stand,” is wholly negative.59 This electronic-human syncretism has supplanted the physicality of humans interacting with the city street and the ensuing act of “tact and contact”; instead we have the “elimination of attention, of human confrontation, of the direct face-à-face, of the urban vis-à-vis.”60 When Virilio looks back at the urban landscape of modernity he sees it sadly as a “‘Monument Valley’ from a pseudolithic era,... a ghostly landscape, the fossil of past societies for which technology was still closely associated with the visible transformations of substance.”61

Virilio’s epitaph for the tangibility of the modern city is extreme in its pessimism and is unresponsive to Sassen’s recognition that urbanism is doggedly persisting into the era of the postmodern world economy, albeit under a new understanding of what centralization actually entails. The site-specificity of the modern street is now the globalized centrality of transnational capital. In this context, we can refer back to Weimar Germany both as the apex of the urban modern and as the germination of the urban postmodern. Weimar spectacle no longer encouraged the directionless dandyism of the Parisian nineteenth-century arcades, nor was it (yet) today’s virtual (i.e., immobile) nonexperience of the TV-supplied living room; rather, it demanded one’s physical presence on the city street. “Berlin by night” was both actual and fabulated; that is, it was both real on the Friedrichstraße and “reel” in the genre of the “street film” (Straßenfilm) with its film-set urbanity. The flânerie that took place during the 1920s in such “world cities” as Berlin and Manhattan was rationalized, applied window shopping—a systematic feminization of the masses, as Andreas Huyssen has defined urban modernity.62 that bespoke the Fordist dictates of mass production and consumption, but was still host to a definite sense of place
for the visual effects, a location for the action, a path for the participant (the mass character of the flâneuse). Weimar visual display was created as a spatial experience whose location was still phenomenological and still on the (newly asphalt-covered) street.

Postindustrial cities today, in contrast, certainly make use of, but no longer in fact require, a series of commercial streets to be the site of spectacle. They differ conceptually very much from the vision of the city called for by functionalist architect Le Corbusier, who wanted the street to be a “traffic machine,” a new factory “organ,” but not yet eclipsed as a display carrier by vehicular traffic’s demands. The electronically commanded surfaces of the renovated Times Square may shine brighter and better than ever before, but even this exterior glory is being undermined from within by Walt Disney and virtual reality arcades setting up shop under its very nose. Window shopping does not, for the most part, take place on the street anymore, but in the electronic home or, at best, in atrium-filled malls: even the recreation of Berlin’s Potsdamer Platz into a millennium-site of urban entertainment amply indicates this shift toward IMAX-enhanced interior space. Walter Benjamin’s claim that “streets are the dwelling of the collective” is no longer true. As Anton Kaes has stated, film director Godfrey Reggio’s postmodern commentary on technology run amok, Koyaanisqatsi (Life Out of Balance, 1983), has overtaken Walther Ruttmann’s modern film-poem of machinic celebration, Berlin, Symphony of a City (Berlin, Sinfonie der Großstadt, 1927). Such, then, is our loss of tactile urban living for which Virilio is so nostalgic. The majority of Americans no longer actually walk in the city. The city comes to us via the media wherever we live, so there is no more need to experience urban surface culture firsthand. “Real” modern manufacturing industry has sold out to “unreal” service industry, outsourcing, and a sheer excess of retailing. Our age is all but devoid of what Michel de Certeau calls “pedestrian street acts,” and the still extant flânerie of old, rich industrial cities has become all but impossible to duplicate.

We may well ask: is there any such thing, then, as postmodern flânerie? Yes, but only in those few urban spaces whose infrastructure was established during industrial modernity (especially Manhattan, Boston, and San Francisco, or European city centers like Amsterdam, London, Paris—or even parts of reconstructed Berlin, and this despite its fractured inner city where the Wall once was). Or again yes, but only when the flânerie concerned is not based on actually walking in the city itself. Think of Stairmasters and other recreation-center regimentations of postmodern America’s
required level of “strolling”—fitness in as condensed a temporal and spatial span as possible. The only places currently being designed to be walked (in the United States, but increasingly so in Europe as well) are suburban shopping malls, and even they are increasingly fashioned like Disneyland/Disneyworld/EuroDisney as the replacement village greens of today. Indeed, the simulational theme park of postmodernity has replaced the spectacular world trade fair of modernity. Outside of Disney in the postmodern urban dystopia, strolling in the city is all too often associated with the loitering of street persons: as Anne Friedberg states, the flâneuse has become a bag lady; and in “imagineered” shopping malls, where limited walking does take place but only in a safe interior, such ugly sights are banned. We can stroll in Disneyland, but when we do so we are moving within a “simulation of the third order,” as Baudrillard states: it “exists in order to hide that it is the ‘real’ country”; its function is to make us think it is imaginary, disguising that “the real is no longer real, and thus . . . saving the reality principle.” Umberto Eco agrees, finding the step from Disney’s “total fake” to the “totally real” of hyperreality to be an instant one. Las Vegas’s Strip now promotes itself as a pedestrian zone, but one that is an electronic film set intended to seduce the walker-gambler into the casinos waiting behind the constantly performing film-façades that reach out to the sidewalk. For Friedberg, the only thing that actually moves with us in the postmodern city is our “spatially and temporally fluid visuality”: if we engage in flânerie, we are not so much street-smart as virtually guided.

The Weimar German urban street experience, on the other hand, even when driven rather than walked, was still set up for a spectatorship commanded by the peripatetic eye. While Weimar Berlin was one of the first (and last) metropolises to successfully combine mass transit (of train, tram, and bus), pedestrianism, and the new car culture, Los Angeles was the first city whose infrastructure fully superseded foot travel. Already boasting more cars in the 1920s than any other city in the world, L.A. signaled, in 1929, the end of the city-walking era with the opening of Bullocks Wilshire department store: its main entrance was in fact at the back of the building, to suit customers emerging from their cars in the massive parking lot; this back entrance was decorated with a ceiling fresco fittingly entitled “Spirit of Transportation.” The rise of the suburban automobile culture that decentered L.A. before any other city did not go unnoticed in the early 1930s by Nazi Germany’s castoffs—the left-wing, Jewish, or otherwise banned antifascist exiles, who soon began to sense that in joining the dia-
spora to L.A. they had left behind what was, by comparison, the intellectual “depth” of Weimar Berlin and traded it for, as Bertolt Brecht felt, the false spatiality of the city of the angels.75

In short, in ways far beyond the surface culture of 1920s Berlin, Los Angeles of the subsequent two decades preempted the postmodern emptying-out of the metropolis—even as it seemed initially to fulfill the heavenly garden-city promise as dreamed of by expressionist antiurban utopians like Bruno Taut.76 As urban critic Mike Davis explains in his City of Quartz (1990), boosterist Los Angeles engaged in a dialectical coalescence of façade “sunshine” and film-set “noir”: devoid as it was (and is) of any “civitas of public places,” L.A. became the “ultimate city of capital, lustrous and superficial, negating every classical value of European urbanity.”77 Erich Maria Remarque, in exile from his native Berlin, complained of his adoptive city’s surface paradise that “real and false were fused here so perfectly that they became a new substance.”78 It was due to the ubiquitous L.A. mode of movie-set-inspired “façade landscapes”79 that Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer felt justified in subsuming their attack on the Culture Industry within their wholesale rejection of the Enlightenment for having produced masses so ready for synchronization (Gleichschaltung) that they would consume or vote Nazi in the same blind breath—a process of massification that facilitated the reduction of the Jews by the Nazis to nonhumans fit only for extermination. The new “hygienic” bungalows on the edges of L.A. make Adorno and Horkheimer nervous in the uncanny resemblance of these “living cells” to the throwaway, transitory architecture (“unsolid structures”) of modernity’s exhibition era; both building-types appear to have been made only to “toss them away after short usage like cans of food.”80 The latter-day “panopticon shopping malls” at which L.A. excels these days are, states Davis, even more unsettling, born as they are of a desire not just to “kill the street” but to “kill the crowd”;81 thus the very harbinger of the urban modern, the (now multiracial) masses, are being eradicated at the same time that the street is being stripped of its walkable traces.

EXHIBITING SUPERFICIES

And yet postmodern urbanity is not completely without steps toward reinstating flânerie, even in the suburban, electronic age. There are indications that the modern street experience can be revived, if only on the level of postmodern public monuments, which self-consciously lend themselves to the cause. A site of urban spectacle can be created that self-consciously plays with the architectonics of surface and material superficiality: indeed,
a longstanding landmark of this is Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers’s Pompidou Center (a.k.a. Beaubourg, 1972–1977) in Paris, an exhibition structure that is painted as bright as a playhouse and shows its interior plumbing on the outside, much to the delight of tourists who come for the tactile experience of enjoying its insane surfaces, riding its transparently encased escalators along the exterior wall, and neglecting the exhibits within.\(^8^2\) Another will occur if the artist Christo succeeds in gaining municipal permission to create his temporary Central Park Project: a series of yellow, cloth-draped gateways positioned along the paths of Central Park, designed for people to walk under and view from both near and afar, underneath and aerially, as interconnecting curves. Frank Gehry’s new Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, which opened in October 1997, places the postmodern attempt at spectacle (a titanium-covered, silvery play of complex spherical structures, arising as if in whimsical, organic motion out of the ground) in ironically suggestive, dialogic counterpoint to the straightforward city streets around it.\(^8^3\) The most immediate effect of such postmodern re-creations of the walkable city is indeed recreational: for a surface spectacle that encourages, even demands, a participatory pedestrian experience is first and foremost a sign of urban self-confidence, and play.

In this way, Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s \textit{Wrapped Reichstag} (\textit{Verhüllter Reichstag}) of 1995 (fig. 2), twenty-four years in the making, constituted an acknowledgment of postmodern nostalgia for the advantages of the modern city experience, in that it obstinately sought, for two weeks, to recreate the ludic power of modern urban display and individual \textit{flânerie}.\(^8^4\) As anyone knows who was there that summer, the only way to experience this event was to go right up to the building and touch it, and then revisit it under a different sky so as to catch the alternating effects of the 330,000 square feet of aluminum-coated fabric covering the façades and the roof of the building—and of course to enjoy the ongoing street-festival atmosphere that its presence produced for the two million people who came to spectate and celebrate. “I have made a building out of a building,” said Christo at the time of construction: “For that I needed material, the structure of a material.”\(^8^5\) Its massive vertical folds sought to create a temporal pause in which surface could rebecome, in an quasi-retro way, the site of new spectacle: a veiling (\textit{Verhüllung}, the Christos insisted, and not the more commercially inclined term for wrapping, \textit{Verpackung})\(^8^6\) that aimed for revelation (\textit{Enthüllung}) via the play of material surfaces. It was a playful version of Heideggerian \textit{alêtheia}, whereby Christo’s \textit{technē} inspires a moment of truth that lies, conversely, in the “concealedness” of folding the veil rather than in any unfolding or “unconcealedness.”\(^8^7\)