

Phantom city.

(For the exhibition "The ghost town", Fundacio Joan Miro, Barcelona)

This paper will pursue two different aims, and it is hoped that they will converge in the end of the reflection. One aim is ^{to} consider the tendency toward an abandonment of towns under the impact of the information revolution. The other is to try and understand the message of the photographs in this exhibition. Should the two aims indeed converge, it may be sustained that the phantoms exhibited are visions of a spectral future which we are approaching with ever more obvious acceleration.

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The city, (in Greek "polis", and in Latin "res publica"), is composed of private homes, (in Greek "oikai", and in Latin "res privatae"), and of an open market place, (in Greek "agora", and in Latin "forum"). Now, if one considers the connotations of the terms just quoted, one sees immediately that what is involved here is the very essence of human existence. The city appears as a materialisation of the structure and the dynamics of "civilized" life, and, if we look at a city, we are seeing not only how people live, but also what they think, what they believe, what they wish, and why they suffer and do what they are suffering and doing. In fact, a phenomenology of a city is the equivalent of a study of a type of existence. The important thing to understand here is the fact that it is the inanimated objects, the houses and market places, which permit the observer to see the structure and the dynamics of human life, and that the presence of human beings in the streets, the vehicles and all the other places will only blur the picture. It is the city emptied of men which best shows off what the observer of civilized life is trying to visualize.

The city is a dialectical structure. Its private houses negate its public places, and they are negated by them. Its "economic" places are negated by its "political" places, and they negate them. It is not a fact, as some ideologies would have it, that the economic level, (the private houses, the "oikai"), are the infrastructure of the city, and the political level, (the open public spaces), are the superstructure. On the contrary: both levels are intimately interlinked, there are doors and windows everywhere, and it is everywhere possible to look at the political scene from inside one's privacy, and to penetrate into the privacy of one's neighbor. The city is a space where there is continuous tension between the private and the public. And that tension is explosive.

If we look more closely, however, we shall find yet another level. The market place, (the "agora", the "forum"), is not only open for people who leave their homes to do business. Not only for people who either go there to exhibit what they had made in private, or to take home what others exhibited there. The market place is not only a place for political commitment. There are trees and flowers in the market place, it is a park, a garden. It is open for idle people, for people who have nothing to do, who have leisure, (in Greek "schole", in Latin "otium"). Those idle people leave their houses in order to meet other idle people and exchange ideas

with them. This third existential level, this idle, "pure", exchange of ideas, is what the ancient Greeks called "philosophia".

Thus, if we look at the city, (any city), if we observe its houses with ~~its~~^{their} doors and windows, and its market places with their parks, we shall discover the structure of Platon's ideal city, his Politeia. We shall understand what Platon means by "economical life", namely a life which goes on within the private house, and which consists of the eternal repetition of absurd gestures: one cooks in order to eat, and eats in order to cook, one sleeps in order to work, and works in order to sleep, one disturbs the order of the house, ("oikonomia"), in order to put it right, and one puts it right in order to be able to disturb it. We shall understand what Platon means by "political life", namely a life which goes on within the market place, and which consists of exhibiting, (publishing), and of taking home, (privatizing): one produces a work of art, (a shoe, a pipe, a book, an image), takes it into the market place to exhibit it there, and one exchanges it for another work of art, (a basket, a dress, another book, another image), to take it home. And we shall understand what Platon means by "philosophical life", namely, a life which goes on within the parks and the gardens, and which consists of exchanging ideas: one contemplates an idea, (in Greek "theoria"), and one submits this idea to the criticism of others, in order to get ever better, clearer ideas, in order to achieve wisdom, (in Greek "sophia"). And finally we shall understand why Platon believes that the true purpose of the city are its parks and gardens: they are the places of the search for wisdom, and it is from there that the city should be governed.

Now of course: what we have done in looking thus at the city is an attempt to look through it. To discover the classical city, (Athens, Rome), behind the modern city. This is why we have discovered Platon's Utopia behind our modern buildings and avenues, and, if we had looked at it from a different angle, we would have discovered Augustin's City of God behind every modern city. Athens, Rome and Jerusalem stand like phantoms behind every Western city, waiting to be exorcized. We may take a more modern attitude toward the city, however. This would consist in concentratig our attention on the doors and the windows. Those instruments wh~~ich~~^h are meant to ^{be} bridges between the private and the public. This would be a more modern approach to the city, because it would touch upon the feeling of unease, ("Unbehagen in der Kultur"), which characterizes modern man both as a citizen and as a private person.

Consider the window. You can sit behind it on a rainy day, observe what is going on outside without getting wet, and you can even open it and speak with those who are getting wet. You are protected by your privacy, and you still participate in the public life of the city. This may be the explanation why revolutionaries like to through stones into windows. There is something illegitimate about windows: they permit to avoid the risks of political commitment. Therefore to sit behind one's widow is not at all like Platon's philosophical life, which is a theoretical contemplation of ideas. He who sits behind his window does

not contemplate ideas, but history, and he does so without himself jumping into its river. His is not a philosophical, but a scientific attitude, and the window poses the modern problem of scientific research. One may take various attitudes toward science, but it is impossible to imagine a window-less city.

As for the doors, they are even more problematic than are the windows. You may go through your door in two directions, and others can go through it. You can leave your home through the door, in order to go into the market place or the garden. And you can come back home through the door with the things and ideas which you have acquired in the market place and the garden. Yes, but: when leaving your home through the door, you have left your home behind you, and when coming back home through the door, you have left the world behind you. Which led Hegel to define what he calls the "unhappy consciousness": if I find the world I lose myself, and if I find myself I lose the world. Doors are the instruments of this unhappy dialectics. But that is not all there is to them. Other people than yourself may use them. Of course: you may put a lock to your door, and give the key to those only whom you have invited. To those with whom you are ready to share your secrets. But it is easy to break keys, to decipher the secrets, if he who wants to break it has power. The door will protect you from politics only if politics does not become total. Only if it respects locks and their secrets. In a totalitarian situation the doors will become one-way instruments: entrances for political influences into the private spaces. Still: it is impossible to imagine a door-less city.

Now let us compare the two visions of the city I have just offered. The "classical" one shows the city to be a structure which permits economic, political and philosophical life to develop, and which may be elaborated so that it become the "ideal" city. The "more modern" vision shows the city to be a dynamism which renders its citizens unhappy, because it has them oscillate between commitment and identification, and because it does not protect them from totalitarian oppression. I shall sustain in what follows that, although both visions of the city are with us, it is the second which now prevails, and that this is the reason why we are beginning to abandon the city.

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Everything that was said above concerning the city may be stated in terms of communication. The city may be seen as a place where informations are being elaborated in private, are then published by their producers in the open space of the market place, and are received by those who go to the market place for the specific purpose of receiving information. One may take a plastic fountain pen as an example. The fountain pen is an object which carries a specific information. This information was elaborated in a private place, (a laboratory), and it was pressed into the object in another private place, (the factory), it was then published in the open space of the market, (in a shop window), to be received and carried home by a person which has left home and gone to the market with the purpose of receiving that information. Both the "classical" and the "more modern" vision of the city may be adapted to this formulation of city structure and city dynamics.

If we look at the city from such an approach, the objects we see there acquire a slightly different aspect. The private places, (the homes, the factories, the work shops), become places of production and consumption of information. The public places, (markets, banks, offices, cinemas), become places of distribution and reception of information. And the parks and gardens, (including schools and universities, those places reserved for leisure, "schole"), become places for the elaboration of information. The windows become instruments for the choice of available informations, and the doors become instruments for the emission of information and for the stocking of acquired information. The city as a whole now appears as an apparatus of communication. Now, as I said above, we no longer feel at ease in the city: it renders us unhappy. We can abandon it, if we succeed in substituting it for a different apparatus of communication.

This is, in short, what the present information revolution is about: to substitute the city by a different communication apparatus. The principle is easy: by-pass the market place, and build channels which bring the information produced in the private place of its author directly into the private space of its receiver. We need not think of such advanced technologies like the telephone, the radio, or the TV, to understand the principle, the newspaper and the post-office, those relatively ancient technologies, will illustrate it. You need not go to town, if you can read what is happening there in your morning paper on your breakfast table, and if you can exchange ideas with your friends by letters. All the information revolution does is broadening the scope of informations thus sent into the private space, and speeding the pace of distribution. You need not go out shopping, if you can see the information there exhibited on your terminal, if you can order the desired information over the teletype, and if this is delivered to you immediately. You need not go to the bank, if you can see your account on your terminal, and draw from it or deposit in it over the minitel. You need not go to the cinema, if you can see the film on your private TV, and you need not go out to vote in a political election, if you can do so by pressing a button on your computer. All the information revolution is doing is to render the city obsolete in practically every aspect of its communication function.

It thus looks as if the information revolution would do away with all the unfortunate aspects of the city. We will need no doors any more, only windows, and those windows will show us everything we want to see, and permit us to get at all the informations we want without our getting wet on a rainy day. With the abolition of the doors Hegel's "unhappy consciousness" will no longer prevail: we will find the world in our very homes, without having to lose ourselves. And as for the secrecy and unviolability of our privacy, it will be guaranteed by the fact that there is nothing public out there any more which would penetrate into our homes, which have become, furthermore, door-less. It looks as if the information revolution, by abolishing the city, is about to establish paradise about us, a paradise even more splendid than Platon's ideal city.

Of course, we know that this is untrue. Let us look at the systems of cables and satellites which will substitute themselves for the cities in the

future, or even at the cities in their present transition toward that future, the cabled cities. What we see is not private homes distributed all over the place, (all over the surface of the Globe), with cables and satellites linking each private place with all the others. What we see is not a Global village which substitutes the cities. What we see instead is a system of irradiating cables, at the one end of which sit a few emitters, and at the other end the enormous mass of the lonely and isolated receivers. It is not true that we see through our windows everything we want to see, but only what the emitters want us to see. It is not true that we find the world in our homes, but we find there the prime minister which we have not invited. It is not true that the public space has been abolished and that everything has become private: on the contrary, the private space has been abolished to be invaded through the window. The systems of irradiating cables and satellites which are about to do away with the city is more totalitarian than any city can be.

One may argue that this is so because the cables and satellites have been installed by city tyrants. By people in power who want to invade us. And that it is possible to re-build the systems. To build networks instead of irradiating cables. To abolish all the emitters, and to have all the users of the cables emit and receive at the same time. One may argue that the prevalently discursive, (imperative), character of the present communication system may be changed into a prevalently dialogical, (democratic), one. That the Global village has become technically feasible, and that it is only the political will which is lacking. Yet even if one argues thus, (and this is a powerful argument indeed), one will not easily abandon the city. True: a democratically cabled society is one in which human creativity can develop far better than in any city, be it as "ideal" as Platon has seen it. Still: if we abolish the city with its open spaces and parks, and if we move into the countryside, (if we abandon "civilisation" and move into "paganism"), we will have abandoned the historical notion of freedom.

There is a German saying which states that the air of the city brings freedom. ("Stadtluft macht frei"). What that saying means is that citizens are free, as opposed to the inhabitants of the fields out there, who live in serfdom. But what the saying implies is that freedom is precisely this oscillating life between the private and the public space, and the opportunity to go to school, be idle, and search for wisdom. It implies that freedom is precisely Hegel's unhappy consciousness, and that, where there is no unhappiness, there is no consciousness, and therefore no freedom. If indeed we are about to abandon the city, (and the symptoms that this is so abound), we have not only to commit ourselves to a democratic rebuilding of the cables, but also to a reformulation of freedom. Because the city is our model for freedom, and, as far as I know, we possess no other.

In conclusion: there are many aspects of the city which make us unhappy. We do not like it any longer. This is why we are making a revolution to do away with it. Leave it there, standing empty, a phantom of the past which we have surmounted. But still: the city is our only model for civilized life, for freedom. We should work hard to build a new model of freedom, before we leave the city.



The photographs in this exhibition show a city emptied of people. One of the reasons why they do so has already ^{been} stated: if we want to have a clear vision of the city, we must remove its inhabitants from it. We can see the houses, the market places, the parks, the doors and the windows clearly, if our attention is not diverted by the people who live in function of those inanimated objects. Now this decision of the photographers to remove people from their town vision merits a short consideration.

What the photographers aim at is a phenomenological vision. They aim at having the phenomenon "city" speak for itself, without being disturbed by the prejudices of its observer. Photography is an excellent method for achieving a phenomenological vision. The photographer does not occupy a specific point of view with regard to the phenomenon he is observing, and he does not believe that there is a specific point of view which is superior to all the others. On the contrary: he dances all around the phenomenon, and tries to pass from one point of view to the next one. The phenomenon is surrounded by an infinity of points of view, all of them are equivalent, and the photographer attempts to occupy a maximum of those points of view, without insisting on any one of them. Now such an attitude is the opposite of the ideological one, which believes that there is a preferential point of view, superior to all the others. The photographer's is a post-ideological attitude, which permits him to have a phenomenological vision.

But we can see, if we look at the photographs in this exhibition, that the phenomenological attitude is not a passive one, but that it is guided by the observer's intention. The photographers have manipulated the city by removing people from it. They show the city as they intend it to be. Because the city, (and any phenomenon), is not something out there which depends on the observer. On the contrary: it is the point of the arrow of the observer's intention. It is out there, because an observer observes it. There is no object without any subject, just as there is no subject without any object. Objects and subjects are nothing but the horizons of a concrete intention, the subject being the point where the intention shoots out, and the object the point it aims at. It is in this sense only that photographs are "documents": they document an intention.

There are however two other reasons why the photographs in this exhibition show a city emptied of people. One has to do with houses, market places, parks, doors and windows, the other has to do with our present disillusion with the city. I shall discuss those reasons one after the other.

The humanistic approach to society is to look at it as a group of people which relate to each other through inanimated objects. Thus a door is explained if one enumerates the ways in which people use it, as they relate to each other: the door serves people as they go in and out of the house to meet each other. But there is an opposite approach to society: one may look at it as a set of inanimated objects which relate people to each other. Thus an inhabitant of a city is explained if one enumerates the ways in which a door makes him behave: he serves the door as he goes in and out of his house, and he meets other people in a pattern which the door has patterned. This anti-humanistic approach to society is best expressed in

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the famous saying: "The things are in the saddle and they ride us". The photographs in this exhibition have assumed this anti-humanistic approach to society, they show the city as a set of inanimated objects. They explain the citizens as functions of those inanimated objects. And this is precisely what is so ghost-like about them: man is exposed there, not as a free agent, but as a function. He has become a shadow.

Now this inversion of the relation "object-man", (no longer is man the constant, and the object the variable, but now it is man who is variable, and the object has become constant), is radically anti-humanistic, because it removes man from the center of the scene and pushes him toward the horizon. In fact, it is a counter-revolution against the humanist and renaissance revolutions with which Modern age was inaugurated. Modern age is over. Still: being anti-humanistic, it is philanthropic. In saying that man is a function of objects, and in putting the objects into the center of the scene, it tries to show what those objects are, and thus help us to free ourselves from their domination. The photographs in this exhibition show us how houses, market places and windows dominate us, so that we may revolt against them. Thus the photographs show in an impressive, even frightening way that if we want to commit ourselves in favor of man, we must become anti-humanistic. Love of man, at present, demands a study of objects, and a struggle against those objects.

Which brings me to the second additional reason why the photographs in this exhibition show a city emptied of people. They show us the inanimated objects of the city, so that we might understand them and fight against them. They show the terror of houses, market places, gardens, doors and windows, so that we may free ourselves from that terror. In fact, the photographs, if read in such a way, become proclamations. They proclaim: look at the city, how terrible it is, how it determines you in every moment of your life, and get rid of it as fast as you can. Move out of the city, abandon it to itself, and begin a new life. If read thus, the photographs in this exhibition become proclamations in favor of the information revolution.

In conclusion: there are three reasons why the photographs in this exhibition were taken and exposed, (although those reasons may not have been consciously present to the photographers and organizers of the exhibition). To permit us a phenomenological, anti-ideological vision of the city. To show the necessity of abandoning humanism for the love of man. And to proclaim the urgency to abandon the city, and to create a new form of existence.

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In the first part of this paper I have tried to consider the city as a structure for civilized life, ("classical" approach), and as the dynamism of the dialectics of the unhappy consciousness, ("more modern" approach), and I have done so, in part, with the aid of the photographs in this exhibition. In the second part of this paper I have looked at the photographs, not to see what they show, but to understand their motives. In the first part I have tried to look at the pictures, in the second part I have tried to look through them. Having done so,

I believe to have found a convergence of the subject and the motives of the pictures. A convergence of what this exhibition shows and why it does so. Let me state that convergence.

This exhibition shows the terror of living in a city, (a "polis", a "republic"). And it shows it, because it believes that it is no longer necessary to live in a city. Thus the exhibition shows what its photographers and organizers, (consciously or unconsciously), hope for: cities emptied of people, and, implicitly, people having left the city. The exhibition shows a utopic vision. Explicitly it shows an abandoned past, and implicitly the radiant future of a humanity living in the paradise of an informatic global village.

But if my interpretation is correct, if this exhibition indeed proclaims a radiant future, why is the climate it irradiates so ghost-like, so gloomy? Of course, you may say that this is so because the exhibition shows explicitly the negative side of the future only. It only shows the terror we are leaving behind, and not the splendor we are approaching. But this cannot be the whole answer.

The exhibition is gloomy, because it is not easy to abandon the city. It is not easy to abandon Platon's vision of a life governed by philosophy, nor is it easy to abandon humanism. What makes us so sad while looking at those pictures is that we see there the accumulated hopes, dreams and projects of past generations, all of which have come to nothing. All of which have become phantoms. In fact, if we take our time while looking at those photographs, we see them to be monuments on the grave of civilisation. The ghost of civilisation still lingers around the monuments, but it is nothing but a spectre. And we, who are about to enter a different kind of life, weep for the phantom city.