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Fable

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The projections of the imaginary as they appear across the field of modernity give rise to a series of questions for the work of critique. A reality less and less distinguishable from fable, to the point that the longstanding arrangement securing their opposition begins to give way, disrupting in turn the wide array of premises and certainties that rest upon this distinction; a reality, above and beyond this, increasingly *derived from* and *conditioned by* the processes of fabulation running through it: this is, for Roger Caillois, the characteristic signature of a certain experience of this modernity. Such experience not only testifies to the repositioning of the sphere in which the fabular circulates but an intensification of its efficacy. Having ceased to be situated at a distance from what is real, no longer casting its shadow over lived reality from an indeterminate elsewhere, it becomes instead the very material out of which the real is composed. "The world in which everything, everywhere, is possible at all times, because the imagination has sent there its most extraordinary enticements ahead of time and discovers them at once – this world was no longer remote, inaccessible, and autonomous. It was the world in which people lived" (Caillois 2003, 178). Now what brings this transformation to pass – Caillois dates it to the first half of the Nineteenth Century – is the emergence of the modern city, the city as backdrop to "a keen

commitment to *modernity*" (182). This shows itself above all in the representational forms devoted to urban experience, and the relation that subsists between the two. Why, then, does the cityscape constitute a privileged point of reference for the study of "the social processes of the imagination"? Because for the first time within modernity's scope the conditions emerge for a form of "mythic" experience that had otherwise fallen into dormancy. Myth, Caillois's preferred term here, is a strain of "collective property"; once it ceases to encompass the collective, pertaining to the individual alone and in isolation, it can no longer be understood as mythic, properly speaking (176). And the same must be said of any fabular phenomenon: it is a projection that necessarily extends beyond the private imagination, that circulates at the level of the *socius*, is even a means by which sociality is itself underwritten.

For Caillois the modern cityscape facilitates such conditions. Within its horizons a "collective mental atmosphere" is inculcated, exerting a "powerful hold", a "constraining force" over an imagination that exceeds the confines of individuated experience. Yet it is one that offers up the city as setting in a particularly paradoxical form, inasmuch as the mythic projection concerns neither the real nor the imaginary in isolation, but the real *as* imaginary: "the realist depiction of a clearly defined city (more integrated than any other in readers' actual lives) was suddenly exalted along fantastic lines" (177). Writing on the same context some time after Caillois, Michel Foucault will pick up the trail of the very same tendency: "For the attitude of modernity, the high value of the present is indissociable from a desperate eagerness to imagine it, to imagine it otherwise than it is, and to transform it not by destroying it but by grasping it in what it is" (Foucault 1997, 311).[1]

1   For both authors (and for Walter Benjamin too, of course), Baudelaire provides the exemplary figure of this "commitment" or "attitude" that confounds any simple opposition between reality and imagination.

Myth, fantasy, and fable, no longer concerned with a world beyond this one, are rerouted back through reality, so that the distinction between the real and the imaginary is reproduced on this side of reality itself. For the collective subject encompassed by this realignment of the spheres of experience in question, what is real seems increasingly dissociated from itself, appearing as its own vestige. "Under these conditions," Caillois writes,

> how could each reader fail to develop the intimate belief (still manifest today) that the Paris he knows is not the only one? Is not even the real one? That it is only a brilliantly lit decor, albeit far too *normal*, whose mechanical operators will never reveal themselves? A setting that conceals another Paris, the true Paris, a ghostly, nocturnal, intangible Paris that is all the more powerful insofar as it is more secret; a Paris that any-where and at any time dangerously intrudes upon the other one? (2003, 179–180)

Reality encompassed by fable appears to retreat behind its own façade, so that contact with it is always imminent, always prolonged – "everywhere, reality was contaminated with myth" (181) – and as Caillois suggests, this myth has yet to relinquish its hold.

It would be possible to plot across the terrain of modernity the new forms of "collective property" precipitated at the level of the imaginary by abrupt changes in social conditions, forms that each time draw the spheres of reality and fable into a zone of disarming indiscernibility. The series of phenomena and the range of contexts brought together in this way would no doubt bear little external resemblance to one another, but they would nevertheless be analogous at the level of structure and function, allowing critique to take stock of the implicit social process at work in the projections of the imaginary. In answer to where such a series would take us, it would no doubt have to pass through – and would perhaps reach its apotheosis in – a text closer to our own historical present, Jacques Derrida's "No Apocalypse,

Not Now." The nuclear age with which the latter is concerned is animated by an intrinsically aporetic circumstance, one that, as is the case with Caillois's Paris study, has acute implications for the relation between reality and the fabular.

The circumstance at stake here is that of nuclear war, the taking place of which raises for Derrida the specter of a properly total event. It brings with it the prospect of an act of destruction that would potentially be without delimitation, one that would withdraw the very ground from which it could be surveyed, an event without spectators, only participants, and as such it implicates "the whole of the human *socius* today" (Derrida 2007, 394). In other words, it traces out the conditions for an unprecedented instance of collectivity (the cityscape is, after all, a local setting, whilst the stage of this war is "nonlocalizable," global and, once underway, would by no means leave the stage itself unaffected).

This is the context in which Derrida begins to approach a disarming hypothesis: With this total event we are left facing "a phenomenon whose essential feature is that it is *fabulously textual*, through and through." Why is this so? Because something can be said of it only insofar as it has not yet come about, insofar as it remains in abeyance, a "non-event." Reference to it in any form is dependent upon its non-occurrence. "The terrifying 'reality' of nuclear conflict can only be the signified referent, never the real referent (present or past) of a discourse or a text." In this sense, it "has existence only by means of what is said of it and only where it is talked about. Some might call it a fable, then, a pure invention" (393). To be clear, this does not consign the destruction it threatens to a realm from which existence can consider itself protected, sheltered, or shielded. On the contrary, it is precisely as a piece of fabulation that the nuclear event acquires its force, that it becomes the "horizon" or the "condition" of all that is considered real.

> For the "reality" of the nuclear age and the fable of nuclear war are perhaps distinct, but they are not two separate

things…. "Reality," let's say the general institution of the nuclear age, is constructed by the fable, on the basis of an event that has never happened (except phantasmatically, and that is not nothing), an event of which one can only speak, whose advent remains an invention of men … The anticipation of nuclear war (dreaded as the phantasm of a remainderless destruction) installs humanity – and even defines, through all sorts of relays, the essence of modern humanity – in its rhetorical condition. (394, 396)

That there is nothing left of the order of reality that is not conditioned by the fable in question is, for Derrida, the signature of the nuclear age, and if this announces a new set of imperatives to which critique must respond, chief amongst them would be the following: should this circumstance be considered unique, singular, something without precedent, or is it the latest stage of a tendency apparently intrinsic to modernity, whereby the potency of the fabular appears to be increasing exponentially and hyperbolically (from the nineteenth century city to the twentieth century war), each time encompassing more and more of "reality"?

References

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