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Farewell to the Linden Arcade

1930



Linden Arcade, Berlin, 1930

The *Lindenpassage* (Linden Arcade) has ceased to exist.¹ That is, it remains a means of passage [*Passage*] between Friedrichstraße and Linden Avenue in terms of its form, but it is no longer an arcade [*Passage*].² When I recently strolled through it once again, as I so often did during my student years before the war, the work of destruction was already almost complete. Cold, smooth marble plates covered the pillars between the shops, and arching above them already was a modern glass roof of the sort one finds by the dozen nowadays. Fortunately, the old Renaissance architecture—that horribly beautiful imitation of style from the time of our fathers and grandfathers—still peeked through here and there. A gap in the skeleton of the new glass roof allowed one to see through to the upper stories and the endless succession of corbels beneath the primary cornice, the linked round windows, the columns, the balustrades, the medallions—all the faded bombast that now no passerby will ever again be able to appreciate. And one pillar, which apparently was to be saved till the end, still brazenly displayed its brick relief work: a composition of dolphins and vine-scroll decoration, with a mask in the middle cartouche. All this is now sinking into a mass grave of cool marble.

I still recall the shivers that the word “passageway” [*Durchgang*] aroused in me when I was a boy. In the books I was devouring at the time, the dark passageway was usually the site of murderous assaults subsequently testified to by a pool of blood. At the very least it was the proper environment for the dubious characters who gathered there to

discuss their shady plans. Even if such boyhood fantasies tended to be a bit excessive, something of the significance they attributed to the passageway clung to the former Linden Arcade. This was true not only of the Linden Arcade but of all authentically bourgeois arcades. There are good reasons *Thérèse Raquin* is set in the rear section of Paris' Passage des Panoramas,³ which has in the meantime likewise been destroyed—crushed by the concrete weight of luxurious new buildings. The time of the arcades has run out.

The peculiar feature of the arcades was that they were passageways, ways that passed through the bourgeois life that resided in front of and on top of their entrances. Everything excluded from this bourgeois life because it was not presentable or even because it ran counter to the official world view settled in the arcades. They housed the cast off and the disavowed, the sum total of everything unfit for the adornment of the façade. Here, in the arcades, these transient objects attained a kind of right of residence, like gypsies who are allowed to camp only along the highway and not in town. One passed by them as if one were underground, between this street and the next. Even now the Linden Arcade is still filled with shops whose displayed wares are just such passages [*Passagen*] in the composition of bourgeois life. That is, they satisfy primarily bodily needs and the craving for images of the sort that appear in daydreams. Both of these, the very near and the very far, elude the bourgeois public sphere—which does not tolerate them—and like to withdraw into the furtive half-light of the passageway, in which they flourish as in a swamp. It is precisely as a passage that the passageway is also the place where, more than almost anywhere else, the voyage which is the journey from the near to the far and the linkage of body and image can manifest itself.

Among the exhibitions in the Linden Arcade that are dedicated to corporeality, the place of honor is occupied by the Anatomical Museum.⁴ It is an arcade sovereign that has established its rightful kingdom among the cartouches, vine-scrolls, and dolphins. Since all the objects that have been driven behind the façade must nevertheless maintain a bourgeois appearance, the inscriptions that encourage people to enter are sanctimonious. One of them reads: "The *Mankind* Exhibition is devoted to the Improvement of Health." Just what sort of revelations await the spectator

inside are betrayed by a picture in the display window which shows a doctor in a frock coat, accompanied by numerous gentlemen whose dress is just as old-fashioned as his, performing a stomach operation on a naked woman. This person was once a lady. Yes, the focus here is on the stomach, the intestines, everything having to do solely with the body. Inside the exhibit, tumors and monstrosities are scrupulously examined, and for adults only there is also an extra display room seething with every possible venereal disease. These are the result of reckless sensuality, whose flames are fanned in a nearby bookstore. Once, during the inflation, a communist bookstore was housed in the arcade of a major German metropolis; it did not last long, however, despite the fact that the arcade had its origin in prewar modernity and, with its cast-iron sunflowers, reminded one more of a decorated underpass. Its tenuous relation to the arcade was already sufficient, however, to force the propaganda literature out, since illegality seeks to break through to daylight whereas pornography is at home in the twilight. The bookstore in the Linden Arcade knows how indebted it is to its surroundings. Paperbacks whose titles arouse desires that their contents could hardly fulfill sprout in an intentionally harmless undergrowth of books. Sometimes the permitted joins the prohibited in curious combinations, as in a book about sexual pervers written by a police chief. In the vicinity of the bodily drives, knickknacks flourish—the countless small objects which we carry around and with which we surround ourselves, partly because we use them and partly because they are so useless. The arcade bazaar is teeming with them: nail clippers, scissors, powder boxes, cigarette lighters, hand-stitched Hungarian doilies. Like vermin, the odds and ends appear in swarms and terrify us with their claim to keep us perpetual company. As if wanting to devour us, they crawl through the worm-eaten building in which we live, and if someday the rafters come crashing down, they will even darken the sky. Stores from the street with wares that satisfy our better corporeal needs are also moving into the arcade, to pay their respects to the Anatomical Museum. Pipes made of amber and meerschaum glisten; shirts dazzle like an entire evening party; shotguns aim their barrels upward. And at the end of the passageway, a beauty parlor beckons with its fragrance. In the semidarkness it reveals its kinship with the café located under the cupola.⁵ The café patrons wander, even if only through

the illustrated newspapers, floating away with the murmuring, following for a bit the train of images that undulates behind the cigarette haze. The motto is: Away!

It is a meaningful coincidence that two travel agencies flank the entrance to the arcade on Linden Avenue. But the trips to which one is tempted by their model ships and poster hymns no longer have anything in common with the journeys one used to undertake in the arcade; the modern luggage store likewise barely belongs inside the passageway. Ever since the earth began shrinking noticeably, bourgeois existence has incorporated travel just as it has appropriated the Bohemian lifestyle; it maintains itself by appropriating these sorts of dissipation for its own purposes and devaluing them into distractions. How much more distant and familiar the foreign was during the age of souvenirs! One of the stores in the arcade is stuffed full of them. "Souvenir de Berlin" is written on plates and mugs, and the flute concert at Sanssouci⁶ is often requested as a little something to bring home. These memory aids that can be fondled, these authentic copies of locally resident originals, are part of the very body of Berlin and doubtless are more qualified to convey to their buyers the energies of the city they have devoured than the photographs which the photograph store invites one to have personally made. The photos claim to bring the traveled lands home; the World Panorama, in contrast, provides the illusion of places one longs for, and distances the familiar ones all the more.⁷ The World Panorama is enthroned in the arcade like the Anatomy Museum; indeed, it is only a tiny leap from the graspable body to the ungraspable distance. As a child, whenever I visited the World Panorama—which in those days was likewise hidden in an arcade—I felt myself transported to a faraway place that was utterly unreal, just as I did when looking at picture books. It could hardly have been otherwise, for behind the peepholes, which are as close as window frames, cities and mountains glide by in the artificial light, more like faces than destinations: Mexico and the Tyrol, which itself turns into another Mexico in the Panorama.

These landscapes are already almost homeless images, illustrations of passing impulses that gleam here and there through the cracks in the wooden fence that surrounds us. It is images such as these that one would see with the help of magic glasses, and one wonders why the optician in

the arcade does not offer such spectacles for sale. The glass foliage that, hard and round, climbs up the sides of the optician's display window at least seems to present things correctly, according to the concepts valid in the passageway. The disintegration of all illusory permanence, a disintegration required by the arcade, is achieved by the stamp shop, in which heads, buildings, heraldic animals, and exotic places are stuck tightly together with numbers and names. (It is no accident that my friend Walter Benjamin, whose work has been focused for years on the arcades of Paris, discovers this image of the stamp shop in his book *One Way Street*.)⁸ Here in the arcade the world is rattled and shaken until it can serve the daily needs of the passerby. Anyone who passes through it might also try the lottery store to see whether Lady Luck, his companion, is well disposed toward him, or he might put her to a test in a card game. And if he wants to confront his glossy paper dreams in person, he can go to the postcard shop, where he will discover them realized in a variety of colorful versions. Flower arrangements greet him with their ingenious language; little dogs run up to him full of trust; student life is marvelously and drunkenly resplendent; and the nakedness of rosy women's bodies immerses him in desire. Next door, imitation bracelets nestle around the neck and arms of a shapely beauty almost on their own, and an outdated hit tune emanating from the music shop lends wings to the arcade wanderer amid the illusions he has discovered.

What united the objects in the Linden Arcade and gave them all the same function was their withdrawal from the bourgeois façade. Desires, geographic debaucheries, and many images that caused sleepless nights were not allowed to be seen among the high goings-on in the cathedrals and universities, in ceremonial speeches and parades. Wherever possible, they were executed, and if they could not be completely destroyed they were driven out and banished to the inner Siberia of the arcade. Here, however, they took revenge on the bourgeois idealism that oppressed them by playing off their own defiled existence against the arrogated existence of the bourgeoisie. Degraded as they were, they were able to congregate in the half-light of the passageway and to organize an effective protest against the façade culture outside. They exposed idealism for what it was and revealed its products to be kitsch. The arched windows, cornices, and balustrades—the Renaissance

splendor that deemed itself so superior—was examined and rejected in the arcade. Even while traversing it—that is, effecting the movement appropriate to us alone—we could already see through this splendor, and its pretentiousness was unveiled in the light of the arcade. The reputations of the higher and highest ladies and gentlemen, whose portraits with their guarantees of fidelity stood and hung in the display windows of the court painter Fischer, fared no better. The ladies of the kaiser's court smiled so graciously that this grace tasted as rancid as its oil portraits.⁹ And the highly touted inwardness wreaking havoc behind the Renaissance façades was given the lie by lighting fixtures in the form of red and yellow roses, which illuminated the interior in a horrible fashion. In this way the passageway through the bourgeois world articulated a critique of this world which every true passerby understood. (That passerby, who roams like a vagabond, will someday be united with the person of the changed society.)

By disavowing a form of existence to which it still belonged, the Linden Arcade gained the power to bear witness to transience. It was the product of an era that, in creating it, simultaneously created a harbinger of its own end. In the arcades, and precisely because they were arcades, the most recently created things separated themselves from living beings earlier than elsewhere, and died still warm (that is why Castan's panopticon¹⁰ was located in the arcade). What we had inherited and unhesitatingly called our own lay in the passageway as if in a morgue, exposing its extinguished grimace. In this arcade, we ourselves encountered ourselves as deceased. But we also wrested from it what belongs to us today and forever; that which glimmered there unrecognized and distorted.

Now, under a new glass roof and adorned in marble, the former arcade looks like the vestibule of a department store. The shops are still there, but its postcards are mass-produced commodities, its World Panorama has been superseded by a cinema, and its Anatomical Museum has long ceased to cause a sensation. All the objects have been struck dumb. They huddle timidly behind the empty architecture, which, for the time being, acts completely neutral but may later spawn who knows what—perhaps fascism, or perhaps nothing at all. What would be the point of an arcade [*Passage*] in a society that is itself only a passageway?

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