

PHANTASMAGORIAS OF THE NATION

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents an alternative approach to the notion of the “imagined community of the nation” by focusing on the role of aesthetics in the emergence of the modern nation. Within the framework of the late 18th-early 20th Century Europe, the thesis explores the modern transformations that gave rise to the nation from a perspective that establishes the convergence of aesthetics and politics as the central process through which the imagination of the nation is (re)produced. It designates unqualified, bodily, “naked” life as the grounds for this convergence, and traces the emergence of naked life through processes of its “scientization” by the discipline of psychophysiology, its “aestheticization” by phantasmagorical spectacles, and its “politicization” through its inscription in the national juridical order around the persona of the citizen. It contends that naked life that first emerged as an imaginable entity in psychophysiology was captured in aesthetic constellations by phantasmagorias, which were then appropriated by the project of nation-building for the forging of the national imaginary. The political function of the “phantasmagorias of the nation” is to uphold the mythical notion of predestination to the eternal present of the nation, which finds its corollary in the fateful subjection of citizens to the mythical violence of the nation-state. The thesis concludes by asserting that this particular conceptualization of the nation proves useful for qualifying the understanding of contemporary politics in general and the arguments about the decline of the nation in particular.

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DEDICATION

To Tom Kemple

I. Introduction

Referring to the body politic of nation as an “imagined community” has become a common heuristic cue to express the distinctiveness and novelty as well as artificiality and inauthenticity of the nation. First coined by Benedict Anderson in 1983 (1991), the term has been widely embraced in critical nationalism studies, along with such other expressions as “invention of tradition” (Hobsbawm, 1983) and “nation-building” (Hobsbawm, 1990) which evoke similar connotations of political machination. The analytical focus of this line of study, which has come to be known as the “modernist approach” to nationalism (Smith, 1988), has been on the “hard” components of modern nation-building, such as the national economy, rational bureaucracy, the national legal system and state-sponsored national symbolism.

The aim of this thesis is to shed some fresh light on the modernist approach to nationalism as developed in the works of Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm by introducing aesthetics as a central axis of analysis into the understanding of the nation as an imagined community. The dimension of aesthetics has been relegated to a relatively subsidiary position in these influential works, where it tends to be addressed as an auxiliary symbolic ornamentation through which the nation-state reinforces its sway over the subjectivities of its citizens. By contrast, I argue that aesthetics, far from being a mere “embellishment”, constitutes an indispensable medium which not only makes possible the imagining of the nation, it also furnishes the very philosophico-legal grounds on which nationhood and citizenship are founded. From this perspective, the thesis reformulates an understanding of the nation as imagined community as a totalizing structure superimposed through aesthetic forms on a fragmented social reality, whose

conditions of possibility first emerged in 19th Century Europe. I argue that at the center of this process is the rise of a conception of biological or “naked” life in *fin-de-siècle* Europe as an imaginable and representable entity, which comprises the “raw material” captured in aesthetic forms that can be molded into the national body politic.

I borrow the term naked life from the work of Giorgio Agamben (1998), who traces it back to Greek and Roman antiquity; however, I will be focusing mainly on the issues raised by the *modern* conceptualization of naked life within the domains of science, aesthetics and politics. The thesis is organized into three parts which develop the progressive emergence of this notion from the *scientization* of naked life to its *aestheticization* and *politicization*, culminating in the inscription of naked life in the philosophico-legal order of nationhood. The aestheticization of politics is thereby revealed as the primary underlying logic of nation-building, in which the aesthetic appropriation of naked life potentially leads to the convergence of biopolitics with the sovereign politics of the nation. I explore the processes of scientization, aestheticization and politicization in the European context from the late 18th to the early 20th Century through a reading of Walter Benjamin’s major works on European modernity, particularly his essays “The Storyteller” (discussed in Part I), “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (the focus of Part II), and “Critique of Violence” (considered in Part III). I illustrate these ideas throughout with examples from a variety of sources, including the work of Jonathan Crary (1990, 1999), Benedict Anderson (1991) and Eric Hobsbawm (1990), among others, in order to show how the rise of nation during this period as an imagined community draws upon scientific, aesthetic, and political understandings of naked life.

In Part I, I trace the emergence in the 19th Century of the concept of naked life divested of all social and historical particularities and conceived mainly in the scientific terms used to define its biological constitution. Here, I adopt a highly selective approach and refrain from delving into a debate on the techno-scientific constitution of life and its subjection to institutional networks of disciplinary power such as in factories, army, school, and prison, which have been extensively analyzed by Michel Foucault (1977, 1990). Rather, the aim of the first part is to set the terms for the following discussion on aesthetics by focusing on a few particular instances of the conceptualization of naked life that later informs the process of its aestheticization. I set out with a brief investigation of the “problem of the subject” characteristic of the 19th Century European sensibility, with particular reference to the increasingly unsustainable subjective model of the “*camera obscura*”, which presupposes a rational sovereign subject facing a decipherable objective world (Crary, 1990). On the one hand, this period witnesses the fragmentation of the individual by the shock experience that characterizes modern urban life (Benjamin, 1969B). This experience is symptomatically mirrored by the individual’s dispersal into a multiplicity of psychological and physiological mechanisms identified by the discipline of psychophysiology which may be considered as the 19th Century “science of the subject” (Crary, 1999). On the other hand, the growing indecipherability of external reality is perceived as an effect of the demise of tradition, and the resulting loss of quality, signification, and memory that people experience in the face of the destructive effects of capitalist modernity (Simmel, 1971; Benjamin, 1969S). These two processes converge in a momentous transformation of the dominant modality of experiencing the world, whereby meaningful historical experience (*Erfahrung*) collapses into a collection

of sensory and inherently meaningless impressions (*Erlebnisse*) (Benjamin, 1969B; 1969S). At the moment when a morcelized subject confronts an indecipherable cosmos, the locus of subjectivity is increasingly sought in the psychophysiological constitution of the individual conceived in interiorized, psychological terms (such as the unconscious), and which finds philosophical articulation in vitalism and artistic expression in 1900 Paris Exhibition. As the individual's conscious faculties are thrown into question and deprived of a decipherable outside world, the main problem for the modern subject becomes the active maintenance of reality in a world of constant flux and displacement. 19th Century theories of distraction and attention were therefore designed to address these problems with the aim of reproducing the experience of a coherent and comprehensible reality through the calculated reconfiguration of the perceptual field and conscious manipulation of the human sensorium. Towards the end of the 19th Century, just as science was engaged in redefining the experience of a meaningful reality as a function of the external organization of *Erlebnis*, art began to emerge as the field best suited for this task.

The second and pivotal part of the thesis therefore focuses on the aestheticization of naked life and the potential this process holds for politics in general, and for imagining the nation in particular. I locate the origins of the aestheticization of naked life in the turn towards art in *fin-de-siècle* Europe as the quintessential domain in which the reintegration of a fragmented subject and reality can be accomplished (Crary, 1999). Art's privileged position at this historical moment follows from its vast synthetic capacities, which derive from the replacement of the ritual principle of semblance (*Schein*) by the technical principle of play (*Spiel*) (Benjamin, 1969A). The primary means by which the

reintegration of experience is effectuated emerges as “spectacle” in general and “phantasmagoria” in particular. As a form of techno-aesthetics, phantasmagoria operates by spatially distributing bodies in a controlled environment, in which they are exposed to rationally calculated and technically fashioned external stimuli. The main social function of phantasmagoria is to absorb participants in the semblance of a coherent reality, thereby compensating individuals for the fragmentation of modern life by *anaesthetizing* them against the anxiety of the *corps morcelé* (body-in-pieces) (Buck-Morss, 1992). As I will try to demonstrate through an analysis of panoramas, individual bodies in their psychophysiological corporeality comprise an integral component of the spectacular-phantasmagorical constellation, whereby naked life passes into the domain of aesthetics. The operational logic of the process of aestheticization is thoroughly informed by the scientifically construed notion of naked life, and more specifically, by the detailed body of knowledge on the psychophysiological constitution of human beings. As a consequence, the narrow scientific conceptualization of naked life – previously restricted to the field of psychophysiology – disseminates into the 19th Century culture as a whole through its appropriation by the aesthetics of the phantasmagorical spectacle.

However, phantasmagoria as an architecture of power not only distributes bodies in the material space of aesthetic constellations but positions them within a “mythical” narrative (Buck-Morss, 1989; Gilloch 1996). That is, the compensatory reality of phantasmagoria becomes a means by which the masses can be inculcated by political representations and thus appropriated by political forces. This moment of *the aestheticization of politics* operates by utilizing modern technology for the reproduction of the lost auratic power that sustains traditional cults and rituals. I will try to illustrate

the operational logic of this process through a consideration of Wagnerian Opera, which stands unrivaled in its phantasmagorical effects and its success in employing technologically constructed art in the production of a mythical semblance in the 19th Century. "Monumentalization" has an indispensable political function in phantasmagoria by upholding the notion of a mythical present as the *telos* of history and by endowing the existing social relations with an appearance of permanence (Buck-Morss, 1989; Caygill 1998). This process of aesthetic monumentalization finds a corollary in the redefinition of politics as the act of giving the naked life of the masses a social form that appears impervious to history and contingency. As a symptomatic expression of the aestheticization of politics, I will examine Nazi aesthetics in general and Leni Riefenstahl films in particular, whose logic of operation was first developed in Wagnerian opera (Crary, 1999; Buck-Morss, 1992).

In the third part, I introduce this theoretical perspective into the works of Hobsbawm and Anderson in order to develop a reformulation of the imagined community of the nation as an aesthetic form superimposed upon a fragmented social reality through phantasmagorical constellations, which have emerged from the temporal and spatial *Spielraum* opened up by the demise of tradition. For this task, I reconceptualize Hobsbawm's (1990) discussion of the role of "proto-nationalisms" (such as locality, language, ethnicity and religion) in terms of the disintegration of tradition by modernity and the reassembly of its fragments around the mythical narrative of the nation. In the same vein, I consider museums, maps, rallies and commemorations, which for Anderson (1991) are primary avenues of the national imagination, as phantasmagorical constellations that not only spatially distribute individual bodies (on the rally ground, vis-

à-vis the map and the flag, etc.) but also temporally embed them within the national narrative. Through these phantasmagorias of the nation, I argue, the superimposition of nation as an aesthetic form is achieved in ways that allow the natural existence of citizens to assume political existence. Locating the moment of passage from the natural to the political domain in the aestheticization of politics in this way introduces a qualification to Giorgio Agamben's theorization of the sovereign politics of the nation-state. Considered from a juridical perspective, the nation as imagined community, which is premised on the aestheticization of politics, forms the nexus by which the aestheticization of life in phantasmagorias of the nation is fused with the politicization of life in the law of the nation-state.

Although agreeing with Agamben's thesis that the nation-state inscribes naked life in the juridical order by suturing it with the persona of the citizen, I hold that the imagined community of the nation constitutes the framework in which this suturing is actualized. In particular the lines that separate lives that are worthy of citizenship from those that are not are positioned on the borders of the imaginary boundaries of this community. The politico-legal implications of the question of *who* is imagined as a member of the national body politic will be explored through the breakdown of the equation "birth=nation" (devised in the French "Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen"), which manifests itself first in the "national question" (which defined criteria of citizenship) in the late 19th Century, and second in laws of denaturalization that were formulated during and after the first World War. The intimate connection between the aesthetico-political imagination of the nation and the legal persona of the citizen will be demonstrated in the "refugee question" that follows on the heels of mass denaturalization

in early 20th Century Europe. In conclusion then I argue that exclusion from the imagined community of the nation divests refugees of all politico-legal status and abandons them to the unmediated, mythical violence of the nation-state, effectively reclassifying them (to use Agamben's terms) as "sacred life", or *homo sacer*, which can be killed without committing homicide.

II. The Scientization of Naked Life: Subjectivity, Experience and Psychophysiology

An age that has lost its gestures is, for this reason, obsessed by them. For human beings who have lost every sense of naturalness, each single gesture becomes a destiny. And the more gestures lose their ease under the action of invisible powers, the more life becomes indecipherable. In this phase the bourgeoisie, which just a few decades earlier was still firmly in possession of its symbols, succumbs to interiority and gives itself up to psychology. (Agamben, 2000G: 53)

This somewhat enigmatic statement refers to two intertwined tendencies that characterize 19th Century European modernity which I hope to explicate in this section. The first of these is its reference to the unraveling of the symbolic fabric of social reality, which no longer renders itself as a decipherable and intelligible text to the subject. The second tendency is the formulation of how the modern subject abandons reflective modes of engaging with the world and takes refuge in the inner recesses of the psyche. What these two themes address is the destruction of the contemplative interface between the subject and the world. The subjective implications of this destruction are not limited to the relationship with the outside world but throw into question whether the inside/outside distinction and the very definition and boundaries of the subject can be sustained. This “problem of the subject” is a distinctive feature of 19th Century sensibility, which finds one of its most insightful articulations in Benjamin’s analysis of the collapse of traditional, narrative experience (*Erfahrung*) into fragmented versions of sensory and immediately lived experience (*Erlebnis*).

Erfahrung as a specific mode of experience is a theme that runs through various works of Benjamin but finds its most comprehensive elaboration in “The Storyteller” essay (Benjamin, 1969S). In designating the peregrine storyteller as the singular

embodiment of *Erfahrung*, Benjamin goes on to extrapolate the sensibility that provides the grounds for this mode of experience. To begin with, the storyteller is essentially one who travels for a living (the wandering journeyman, the trading seaman) or who travels at some point in his life (the master craftsman is formerly a wandering journeyman himself) (Ibid: 85). This understanding is reflected in the etymology of the word *Erfahrung*, which includes the verb *fahren* (to travel) in its root. Experience can therefore embody distant and unfamiliar knowledge and impressions, which one accumulates and preserves for passing on to others. The preservation of an unfamiliar experience through intelligible transmission and reception – in other words, its “familiarization” – is made possible by the contemplative act of relating it to one’s past experiences. The communicability that defines *Erfahrung* becomes possible within a shared framework of signification and meaning, whose roots are entangled with memory, which Benjamin defines as “the epic faculty *par excellence*” (Ibid: 97). Emerging in the gap between present and unfamiliar experiences and past and familiar ones, *Erfahrung* essentially unfolds in a narrative structure and thus “has its necessary correlation not in knowledge but in authority – that is to say, the power of words and narration” (Agamben, 1993: 14). The synthesis of *Erfahrung* with narrative authority involves the constitutive act of weaving together a “tradition”, and the storyteller who wields this authority – both through the act of narration and from the auratic quality of his relation to his listeners – becomes its mouthpiece. The archetypical form of *Erfahrung* as a mode of experience embedded in tradition manifests itself in the maxim and the proverb, such as the German saying with which Benjamin begins his discussion in “The Storyteller”: “When someone goes on a trip, he has something to tell about” (Benjamin 1969S: 84).

Jonathan Crary captures this peculiar mode of subjectivity with the model of the *camera obscura*, which he refers to in order to succinctly characterize the period from Renaissance to the early 19th Century (Crary, 1990). The *camera obscura* is not only a technical device but primarily a social *assemblage* which institutes both an optical regime and a specific subject-effect (Ibid: 37). In this regime, representation takes place between a mechanical apparatus and a world of objective truth, with respect to which the supposedly autonomous, “enclosed”, and disembodied observer is excluded from the process of representation and stands as an aloof juror who ensures the correspondence of representation with reality (Ibid: 41). The human faculty of vision (and by extension, perception in general) is conceived as the anthropomorphized counterpart of the *camera obscura*, which thereby serves the nonsensory (mental) faculty of understanding by casting its sovereign gaze on a “common surface of order” (Ibid: 57-8). The relationship between this subjective model of the mind and *Erfahrung* as a particular mode of experience is twofold. First, the objective world is understood to be self-identical and unproblematic, and in its *common* surface of order it presents a template that is equally decipherable by everyone. This idea finds its counterpart in Benjamin’s argument that tradition constitutes a common ground of reference that the individuals exchanging experiences can make recourse to in meaningfully integrating the unfamiliar. The second aspect involves the separation of the cognitive faculty from the sensory faculties, and the sovereignty of the former over the latter. As the storyteller goes on a trip and lives through new things, his synthesis of these impressions into experience sets in *after* the perceptual process is completed. The act that creates *Erfahrung* is *sui generis* contemplation, which presupposes that the newly acquired perceptions will by definition

yield themselves to synthesis with past memories. Thus, the subject of *Erfahrung* is a sovereign subject who explores a world “as an object *capable* of being experienced, and hence as *capable* of being intelligibly navigated” (Bernstein, 1999: 143, emphasis added).

With the advent of modernity the synthesis of experience and authority that sustains tradition is radically shattered. This disintegration follows from a major reconfiguration of the relationship between the sensuous world and the subject which becomes most visible in the modern metropolis. The storyteller as the figure *par excellence* of traditional experience finds its polar opposite in the urban dweller as the quintessential embodiment of modern experience. Benjamin’s conception of modern experience centers on human psychophysiology. At the root of the collapse of traditional experience is a kind of sensory alienation that issues from the violence of the external stimuli that one is exposed to in the big city. In factories and department stores, in panoramas and theaters, but above all, in the midst of the urban masses, the individual finds himself or herself hurled into a deluge of excessive energies which deliver physical sensory shocks that have their counterpart in psychic shock. In characteristically poignant imagery, Benjamin compares this experience of being overwhelmed by external energies to the “shell-shock” (*Chockerlebnis*) incurred by artillery barrage in the Great War, which he suggests has become the norm that governs modern life (Buck-Morss, 1992: 16). The magnitude, unexpectedness and rapid succession of external stimulation that color the everyday world of the city overpower one’s psychic capacity to synthesize sensory perception into meaningful experience (Benjamin, 1969B).

Threatened by traumatization and having neither time nor energy to assimilate these shock effects, the urban dweller inserts a protective shield of intensified conscious

response between his or her inner psyche and the torrent of the outside world. This specifically Freudian insight informs not only Benjamin's but also Simmel's understanding of the experience in the metropolis, who describes this protective mechanism as the "*blasé* outlook" which ensures the psychological integrity of the individual by numbing the sensorium (Simmel, 1971: 329). This psychophysiological process operates by fixating sensory experience at a particular moment in time and by deflecting unassimilable stimuli into the unconscious. That is, while preventing sense perceptions from entering into and bursting the domain of conscious memory, this operation does not completely ward off the onslaught of impressions but lodges them in the unconscious as traces that are half-registered, still less understood (Gilloch, 1996: 143). The subjective implications of this process are twofold. On the one hand, present consciousness is severed from past memory and hence uprooted from tradition, which culminates in a fundamental amnesia that impresses itself as a distinctive mark of modernity. On the other hand, in bypassing conscious reflection altogether and registering itself directly in the unconscious, new experience remains a series of discrete and sensory impressions that belong exclusively to the corporeal domain. Hence these impressions are reconstituted as *exclusively lived* experience (hence the verb *leben* in the root of the term *Erlebnis*) which eludes linguistic articulation, even making incommunicability its hallmark. Again, Benjamin draws his insights from the World War I veterans who he observes have "returned from the battle grown silent" – not richer but poorer in communicable experience" (Benjamin, 1969S: 84). The destruction of tradition under the onslaught of modernity crystallizes in the supplanting of *Erfahrung* by *Erlebnis* which, as the "quintessence of a passing moment" (Benjamin, 1969B: 185), becomes the

corollary of forgetfulness and renders "the experience of modernity ... oblivious of itself" (Caygill, 1998: 69).

Benjamin's analysis depicts the rise of a modern subject who confronts a world which no longer delivers signification and meaning but rather brutal shocks and senseless intrusions that mangle the synaesthetic system and destroy the conscious interface that once intelligibly mediated the individual's relationship with external reality. This outcome implies, on the one hand, the radical, unmediated openness of the individual vis-à-vis the outside world, as evidenced in the direct impact of physical stimulation on the deep recesses of the psyche (the unconscious). On the other hand, it prompts a process of turning inward whereby the individual seals himself or herself off from the surrounding environment by abandoning contemplative reception. Benjamin's observations on this phenomenon in his writings on cities and in his reflections on the neurological understanding of modern experience are by no means novel. Rather, they are informed by a scientific body of knowledge generated over the course of the 19th Century primarily in the emerging "psy-" disciplines such as psychology and psychiatry, but above all, in psychophysiology. In attempting to understand the boundaries and the working principles of the human sensorium on the one hand, and the impact of perception on human psychology on the other, this discipline can be called the quintessential "science of the subject" of the 19th Century.

When Benjamin elaborates on the collapse of *Erfahrung* into *Erlebnis* under the conditions of modernity, he is expressing in a different idiom the culmination of a century-long process by which the sovereign subject of the *camera obscura* was dismantled under the endless dissections of the science of psychophysiology. As early as

the 1810s, this mode of subjectivity came into question and became harder to sustain. Goethe and Schopenhauer were among the first to propose that vision is not independent of human physiology, on the basis their experimentations with retinal afterimages (Crary, 1990: 69-74). The most significant implication of this proposition was the displacement of the model of vision from the apparatus of the *camera obscura*, which could presumably be understood with clarity and certainty, to the carnal ground of the human body, which makes opacity, temporality, and flux an integral part of human perception. By the 1840s, the physiological foundation of perception had become almost an axiom for further experimentation, with the new discipline of physiological psychology hypothesizing that the physical subject could be viewed as an assemblage of organic and mechanical systems for conducting empirical and quantitative experiments, with special emphasis on the workings of the eye (Ibid: 81). Around mid-century, Johannes Müller demonstrated that light sensations could be evoked through internal and external induction in the complete absence of light, thereby obliterating the assumption that referentiality forms the basis of perception (Ibid: 91). This discovery of "referential illusion" suggests that the physiological body inhabits a matter-filled world which together comprise an *immanent plane*, a rhizomatic space in which the inside/outside distinction is fundamentally confounded and the boundaries of perception dissolve in an economy of forces and energies, stimuli and sensations (Crary, 1999: 38).

It is around this time that the beginnings of an unraveling in the conditions of possibility of *Erfahrung* become clear, as the world which is the foundation of this mode of experience loses its self-identical character. As the unproblematic objectivity of the world falls into question, its decipherability is dragged down with it. The primary

symptom of this process is “the convulsive collapsing into each other of body-space and image-space in the metropolis, which assaults the boundaries between the subject and the object, making both into elements of an at once perceptual and material environment” (Hansen, 2004: 23). As the enclosed and disembodied status of the subject of the *camera obscura* becomes untenable, the boundaries that separate him or her from the sensory environment begin to blur, and it becomes progressively harder to locate a definitive interface between the physiological human sensorium and the physical perceptual field. As a consequence, the critical contemplative distance from which *Erfahrung* can be weaved is effectively annihilated. As Benjamin notes, for example, advertisements are rendered superior to criticism as an effect of their “jerky *nearness*”, “[n]ot what the moving red neon light says – but in the fiery pool reflecting it in the asphalt” (Benjamin, 1996OWS: 476, emphasis added). It is in this fluid and metamorphic space that *Erlebnis* finds itself at home, whereby the individual does not “experience” but merely “lives through” the thicket of sensations that temporarily imprint themselves on the sensorium.

The dispersal of the subject in a rhizomatic field of stimuli and sensations gives rise to a peculiarly modern phenomenon that appears frequently in Benjamin’s work: distraction. A point often underemphasized by Benjamin and his critics alike is the centrality of the idea of “attention” in 19th Century culture, which is the necessary corollary to distraction. As Crary notes, the concept of attention offered a solution to the problem of “reality maintenance” by positing a psychological capacity for the synthesis of sensations into an orderly and productive world in the face of an ever more intense, multifarious and fluctuating perceptual field (Crary, 1999: 15). The theme of reality maintenance suffuses not only the epistemological concerns of scientists but late 19th

Century culture as a whole. It is a concern among industrialists for adjusting the rhythm of production, no less than among workers for preserving their limbs, among artists for enforcing their creative energies, and among all urban dwellers for safely navigating the streets of the metropolis. The idea that the subject actively and synthetically constructs reality became so well established by 1880s that psychologist Pierre Janet diagnosed the lack or impairment of synthetic capacities as a pathology, thus instituting attentiveness as a normative model of subjectivity (Ibid: 95). It is only in relation to and as a deviation from this normative model that distraction emerges; Benjamin's designation of it as the modern mode of perception testifies to the sway that the attentive model of subjectivity had over *fin-de-siècle* sensibility. In his essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", he recognizes this phenomenon in the need "to produce experience synthetically ... under today's conditions, for there is less and less hope that it will come into being naturally" (Benjamin, 1969B: 157).

It is important to note that the very emergence of the term attention can be understood as having been conditioned by the demise of the subject of the *camera obscura*, in which self-possessed "consciousness" loses its indisputable foundation and a decentred subject dissolves into a field of dispersed, multiplied and uprooted signs (Crary, 1990: 128). No sooner than the issue of attention assumed prime importance, competing theories of attention proliferated which located the active synthetic function either in human will or in external mechanisms. However, as psychophysiological studies, and most importantly, the discovery of the "referential illusion", increasingly showed, the defectiveness, inconsistency and precariousness of the human psyche and sensorium were found to offer too unreliable a ground for the human will (Crary, 1999:

43). With the rise of scientific psychology attention now came to be understood as a faculty that can be procured primarily through the external manipulation of perception, in particular, by structuring *Erlebnis* through the inhibition of certain (“distracting”) sense impressions and by the reinforcement of certain others.

If the displacement of the source of attention from individual will to external manipulation lands a crippling blow on autonomous consciousness and thus to the sovereign subject of *Erfahrung*, the *coup de grâce* is delivered by the idea of the unconscious and universal suggestibility. Towards the end of the century, the use of hypnotism and suggestion in psychology became a widespread practice. While hypnotism revealed that the psychological, physiological and social dimensions of the human psyche form a chaotic and inextricable web, the studies of Hippolyte Bernheim showed that even “normal” human beings – not just the psychological patients (above all hysterics) – are prone to hypnotic effects (Crary, 1999: 65; Silverman, 1989: 296). The implications of these experiments were groundbreaking, for they suggested that the normal subject too has a split consciousness, harboring a hidden psychic dimension (the unconscious) which is extremely susceptible to suggestion through visual stimulus-induction. This implication points to the possibility that consciousness may be bypassed altogether, as stimuli directly penetrate into the unconscious and evoke sensory and emotional responses that evade cognition.

Hence at the turn of the century, the conditions that were presumed to make *Erfahrung* possible, that is, an autonomous contemplative subject separate from and sovereign over a self-identical, decipherable reality, are shaken. In their stead stands an essentially psychophysiological subject comprised of an enigmatic unconscious and a

messy sensorium with indiscernible boundaries with regard to which conscious life is not “sovereign” but rather “susceptible” to external influences. More significantly, at this historical moment no one seems to lament the demise of *Erfahrung* and its autonomous subject, nor do they even appear to remember this mode of experience, for they are too busy participating in modernity’s obliviousness of its own experience. In the 1900 Paris exhibition, for example, *fin-de-siècle* society celebrated the artistic liberation of sensation from signification embedded in language, historical memory and sexuality (Crary, 1990: 96), and apotheosized “mobility, simultaneity, indeterminacy, and the metamorphic fluidity of the unconscious” as the heart of the modern and the quintessential expression of “life” (Silverman, 1989: 297). The undulating and sprouting *art nouveau* motifs that bore their stamp on virtually every surface of the exhibition, combined with the invisible magic of electricity, “nourished a sense of seething, unbounded and immaterial power: ‘Life seethes in this immense reservoir of energy’” (Ibid: 298). The organicist design of *art nouveau* directly appealed to the unconscious dimension of the modern subject with a “non-discursive metamorphic logic speaking a non-narrative language” (Ibid: 311). Hence, the subject of modernity could now be conceived only in “vitalist” terms, as a source of pure, unbounded, formless life, freed from the encumbrances of tradition, society, language, and above all, experience. The modern subject of *fin-de-siècle* Europe could be reconstituted as natural, naked life *par excellence*.

III. The Aestheticization of Naked Life: Art, Spectacle and Phantasmagoria

The transformation of the dominant mode of subjectivity and experience cannot be fully understood without situating it within the broader reconfiguration of cultural production in the 19th Century. This reconfiguration constitutes the subject matter of Benjamin's now classical essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", which explores the dynamic nexus between technology, art and subjectivity under the novel conditions brought about by modernity.¹ The idea that technology is not an external attachment to the work of art but integral to its meaning constitutes the main axis of this essay. Benjamin's main concern is not the effect of the mechanical reproduction on actual artworks, but the subjective impact of the technological reproducibility of the artworks on the fundamental modes of perception and apperception that govern their production and reception. In other words, Benjamin dissects the very heart of the issue of aesthetics in revealing the 19th Century revolutionary transformation in aesthetic production and appreciation from the auratic principle of semblance (*Schein*) to the technological principle of play (*Spiel*). Standing in the midst of this transformation, the artwork constitutes "the monad of experience with respect to technological change" (Caygill, 1998: 95). From this perspective, the aura and authenticity are no longer understood to be *properties* of the artwork that have been shed with the advent of its technological reproducibility, but rather *modes of perception* that govern the relationship between the artwork (object) and the spectator (subject) (Ibid: 102). In this respect, the theme of the decay of auratic experience that comprises the

¹ More recent translations corrected the title of this essay as "The Work of Art at the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" (Benjamin, 2002), which presents a truer expression of Benjamin's concern with the implications of technology in the domain of art and in the modern culture in general, which the term "mechanical" fails to capture. In what follows, I refer to it simply as "the Artwork essay."

principal problematic of the Artwork essay should be understood in the light of the discussion of subjective experience presented above, that is, as the supplanting of the conscious sovereign subject of *Erfahrung* by the exclusively psychophysiological subject of *Erlebnis*.

For Benjamin, the traditional artwork is defined by its unique and authentic qualities as “here and now” and its testimony to the historical period it has witnessed (Benjamin, 1969A: 220). The embeddedness of the artwork in tradition makes it an instance of representational relations similar to the operation of the *camera obscura*, insofar as both exemplify a relation of signification between a discernible signifier and an unproblematic signified. Benjamin captures the sensibility that accrues from the singularity and authenticity of the artwork with the term “aura”, which manifests itself in the “unique phenomenon of a distance” that comes between the artwork and the spectator (Ibid: 222). The auratic distance that separates the artwork from the observer is akin to the distance from which the sovereign subject of the *camera obscura* confronts the objective world, in which he or she is excluded from the relation of representation. The function of the observer in the presence of a traditional artwork is restricted to ensuring the representational correspondence by deciphering it as a “symbol” that stands for an intelligible reality. The sensibility that governs the engagement with this kind of artwork is *mémoire volontaire*, which hinges on the contemplative reception of the artwork by the spectator. This mode of reception is analogous to that of the experience delivered by the storyteller insofar as both share a bivalent *authoritative* character. On the one hand, by virtue of its authenticity, the traditional artwork lays claim to a truth about the historical period in which it is situated through recourse to the rituals that it has served by virtue of

its use— or, rather, “cult value” (Ibid: 224). On the other hand, the reception of the message it delivers unfolds in a narrative structure whereby the observer transforms the knowledge embodied in the artwork into meaningful experience (*Erfahrung*) by interweaving it with his or her past memories. The auratic distance, conscious reception, and temporal synthesis that are characteristic of the experience of the traditional artwork constitute a contemplative interface that mediates the observer’s relation to it. Seen through this interface, the traditional artwork conveys an aesthetic sense of “semblance” (*Schein*) characterized by totality, closure and meaning.

With the introduction of technical reproducibility into artistic practices, both the production and the reception of artworks undergo a tremendous transformation. On the production side, reproducibility creates a plurality of copies independent of the original which substitute a mass existence for the unique existence of an artwork, and which thus hollows out the work’s authenticity and source of authority (Ibid: 221). This destruction is completed by substituting copies for the original in situations where it is impossible to access the original itself, but where the actualization of the artwork outside of its historical context is now made possible. In Benjamin’s words, this “enables the original to meet the beholder halfway”, which can be understood as the violation of the auratic distance, or breach of the contemplative interface, that mediated the engagement with the artwork prior to its reproducibility. In other words, the decay of the aura issues from the detachment of the artwork from the domain of tradition, as a result of which the mediation between representation and signification evaporates.

A momentous effect of the severance of the artwork from tradition is the effacement of the elements of temporality, memory and narrativity in the artwork, which

explodes the totality and closure of semblance (*Schein*) into a multiplicity of uprooted and decontextualized aesthetic fragments. In the process, the loss of the cult value of traditional artworks (and by extension, cultural artifacts in general) is met by a great increase in their visibility and ubiquity, or in other words, in their “exhibition value.” The collapse of *Schein* gives rise to an expanded “room-for-play” (*Spielraum*), in which the artist can experiment with the uprooted fragments and bring them together in new constellations that no longer have to correspond to a historical reality. Among the illuminating examples of this principle that Benjamin refers to is avant-garde art, and particularly Dada with the practice of “montage” (Ibid: 238), but the epitome of this process is expressed in the technology of film, which reassembles the fragments of experience in order to give them an appearance of aesthetic totality (Hansen, 2004: 15-6). The technological principle of “fragmentation and reassembly for infinite improvement” (*Einmal ist Keinmal* – “once-is-good-as-never”) that governs modern life in its entirety – especially on the assembly line, in the segmentation of space and time into abstract, quantifiable units – finds its most unambiguous expression in film, with its huge synthetic capacity for crafting a semblance of reality from the rhizomatic cultural field of dispersed, multiplied and uprooted signs, a point I shall return to.

Technological reproducibility revolutionizes not only the production but also the reception of the artwork. Benjamin observes that the mass existence of the artwork is now met by an “urge to get closer to things” on the part of the urban masses (Benjamin, 1969A: 223). This drive towards ecstatic immersion and immediate gratification in the artwork is a corollary of the collapse of the auratic distance that once mediated their reception, and implies a direct contact between the sensory perception of artworks and

the inner psyche of the spectators. Equally important is the new subjective modality of the recipient of works of art, which now finds its embodiment in the urban masses. The phenomenon of the urban masses becomes increasingly salient at the turn of the century and finds its first sociological articulations in the influential works of Gabriel Tarde and Gustav Le Bon. It is striking to observe that these thinkers conceive of mass or crowd subjectivity less in terms of conscious deliberative subjecthood than in terms of psychological and perceptual operations (Crary, 1999: 243-6).² In both Tarde's and Le Bon's accounts the mass (*la foule*) is primarily a psychophysiological entity in which the individual is dissolved through his or her proximity to other bodies and to images in the perceptual field. In this respect, the dispersal of the subject into a force-field of stimuli and responses and the convolution of body-space and image-space are quintessentially incarnated in the urban crowd which resonates and vibrates with the sensory torrent of the daily metropolitan life. It is against this rhizomatic background that Benjamin's observations on distraction as the defining character of the masses becomes intelligible.

The arguments noted in the previous section pertaining to the inseparability of distraction from attention are especially true in the case of the masses, and the problem of *collective* reality maintenance becomes all the more pressing towards the end of the century as the urban masses increasingly influence the urban sensibility and modern politics. In this period, attempts are made to contain the threat posed by the vast but directionless energies of the masses by molding this amorphous body into intelligible

² A few decades later, Walter Benjamin would express the truth of the crowd – its government by subrational, unconscious elements – with these words: "The mob, impelled by a frenetic hatred of the life of the mind, has found a sure way to annihilate it in the counting of bodies. Given the slightest opportunity, they form ranks and advance into artillery barrages and department stores in marching order. No one sees further than the back before him, and each is proud to be thus exemplary before the eyes behind" (Benjamin, 1996OWS: 458).

social forms, or in other words, by capturing it in the semblance of a meaningful social reality (Buck-Morss, 1992: 28). The primary means by which this is effectuated is the deployment of techniques of attention, which fashion the collective apprehension of reality by engineering the perceptual field. For Le Bon, the psychophysiological constitution of mass subjectivity in which critical distance and contemplation are exhausted renders the crowd extremely susceptible to suggestion through the external orchestration of sensations (Crary, 1999: 246). More importantly, the destruction of tradition removes the constraints of referentiality from the fabrication of a semblance of reality upon which the attention of the masses are fixed. Instead, this process of social control through the engineering of attention operates by the technological principle of fragmentation and reassembly, in particular, by forging the *perception* of a meaningful totality out of the multiplicity of uprooted signs that now litter the cultural domain.

In the 19th Century, the phenomenon that is most exemplary of the deployment of the technological art of creating the semblance of an apprehensible reality that is produced and received *en masse* is the “spectacle.” As early as 1840s, the convergence of psychophysiological knowledge with the technical principle of fragmentation and reassembly in the designs of various optical devices subjected the human sensorium to “a complex kind of training” (Benjamin, 1969B: 175). Benjamin’s choice of the term “training” is especially insightful, for it points beyond the domain of entertainment to facilitate an understanding of the social functions of the spectacle. What lies beyond (rather, within) this domain is an intense experimentation with the faculty of human perception and an exploration of the possibilities for creating the semblance of a coherent, apprehensible reality out of a dispersed and rhizomatic perceptual field. Despite

their immense diversity – from the thaumatrope and stereoscope to the panorama and diorama – the technologically produced spectacles of this period were based on the operational logic of human psychophysiology in attempting to capitalize on the inconsistency of the human sensorium for producing novel experiences, and thus on the subject's capacity for manipulated stimulation (Crary, 1999). For example, the thaumatrope ("wonder-wheel") created an effect of motion through the rapid succession of still images, but at the same time exploited and experimented with the phenomenon of the retinal afterimage to this effect. Similarly, while stereoscope distributed identical photographs in a box with a binocular aperture and produced a vision in which objects appeared three dimensional and tangible, its very production of this experiential effect followed from an experimentation with human binocularity. In this respect, the entertainment value of optical devices was inseparable from epistemological concerns about the boundaries and workings of the psychophysiological human subject. The concern that is central to all spectacles is the problem of distraction and attention, that is, how to organize the perceptual environment for the subject in such a way as to curtail perceptual dispersion and to create conditions for the maintenance of a particular form of reality.

An illuminating example of externally fashioned reality maintenance is presented by the panoramas, in which spectators are spatially fixed and exposed to a mechanically engineered flow of natural images which creates a semblance of "changing time of the day in the landscape, the rising of the moon, the rushing of waterfalls" (Benjamin, 1978P: 149). In "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century", Benjamin is keen to observe the "tireless exertion of technical skill to make panoramas the *scenes* of a *perfect imitation* of

nature” (Ibid: emphasis added). This statement contains two key insights into the workings of the spectacle. First, the word “scene” suggests that what is experienced is in fact a technically produced “semblance” of reality rather than the reality itself. However, at the same time, the “perfect imitation” of this supposed reality implies that this semblance is experienced *as reality* – that is, a panorama of the Egyptian pyramids at sunset is experienced by the audience as what a sunset on the Egyptian pyramids *does* or *should* look like. Hence, the spatial distribution of bodies in a technically organized visual environment makes panoramas (and spectacles in general) an “architecture (as opposed to a mere optics) of power”, one which captures the attention of the audience by absorbing it in a totalizing semblance of reality (Crary, 1999: 75). In this regard, Benjamin’s coupling of panoramic painting with architectural construction with respect to their capacity to outgrow traditional art is not coincidental (Benjamin, 1978P: 149). The absorption or, rather, *incorporation* of the audience into this architecture takes place on the psychophysiological level, whereby the stimuli and responses that culminate in the experience of reality take place on an immanent plane of perception, so that body-space and image-space become indistinguishable. By “attending” to the spectacle, the audience “*participates*” in it; that is, the spectators do not engage the spectacle from a distance that accommodates a contemplative interface (as would be required by an auratic artwork); rather, their subjectivity “dissolves” into the visual space of the spectacle, of which they form a constitutive, integral *part*. Hence, panoramas constitute a totalizing aesthetic form, a technically produced and reproducible semblance, in which individuals are literally captured or wired in through their psychophysiological existence. By fusing the

psychophysiological subject with an aesthetic form, panoramas present one of the first instances of the aestheticization of naked life.

Given the synthetic capacity of the new spectacular art to forge totalizing and meaningful aesthetic semblances in a period when the perceptual field is ever more chaotic and the subject is increasingly agonized by fragmentation under the shocks of everyday life, it is not surprising to observe in *fin-de-siècle* Europe a mass obsession with the spectacular – as evidenced in the popularity of optical devices, panoramas, dioramas, and theater – and an apotheosis of artistic practice. At the root of the turn towards art as the ultimate redemptive practice is a twofold anxiety that issues, on the one hand, from the fragmentation of the individual subject under the shocks of metropolitan life, an experience which Jacques Lacan would later call *le corps morcelé* (the body-in-pieces) (Buck-Morss, 1992: 37); on the other hand, this anxiety derives from the dissolution of traditional social forms and institutions which culminates in the emergence amorphous and unpredictable urban masses that threaten social order. It is against this background that towards the end of the century the spectacle begins to emerge as a means of simulating social cohesion and unification (Crary, 1999: 184) by fusing shattered experience into an apprehensible reality. At a time when human psychology was increasingly understood in terms of the unconscious and suggestibility, art-induced fantasy becomes a sort of sculptor's mold that gives the raw material of unconscious operations a coherent form and a sense of consistent subjectivity. This idea finds its counterpart at the collective level in the belief in art's capacity and mission to counter the danger posed by the amorphous, unpredictable masses driven primarily by unconscious forces: by molding this shapeless collective body of naked life into intelligible social

forms, art could offer a model and means by which they could be reshaped into a people, a society, and a body politic.

The most significant attempt to actualize the reintegrative potential of art in the 19th Century materialized on the stage of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus (Bayreuth Festival Theater) masterminded by Richard Wagner. In its operational principles, its effects on the audience, and its social functionalism, Wagnerian opera offers a paradigmatic instance of “redemptive” artistic practice in *fin-de-siècle* Europe, which set the standards for the 20th Century society of the spectacle and which was to succeed in remaining unrivaled until the arrival of the sound film half a century later. Wagner’s genius and the magnitude of his success lie in his ability to combine a thorough knowledge of human psychophysiology with the utmost utilization of the artistic room-for-play (*Spielraum*) for engendering unprecedented experiential effects in the audience.

The centrality of human psychophysiology to Wagnerian opera is manifested in Wagner’s obsession with attention and distraction. Every innovation that the conductor introduced to the layout of the opera house was informed by a commitment to exploiting the radical openness, inconsistency and susceptibility of the human sensorium to externally manipulated stimulation. In his technical machinations, Wagner exploits this susceptibility to the fullest for procuring the sustained and continuous attention of the audience and thus absorbing it into the semblance of reality that he constructs on the stage. For Wagner, the success of the spectacular artwork is in direct proportion to its capacity to capture the audience by subordinating its attentiveness to the will of the artist. Thus, he criticizes the layout of the traditional theater for having too many “distracting” elements that draw the attention of the audience away from the stage and thereby produce

a “lower”, “ethically inferior” form of listening (Ibid: 249). To address this artistic failure, Wagner introduced several novelties to the design of Bayreuth. He eliminated the lateral views in order to ensure a frontal engagement with the stage for every spectator, and created a near-total darkness above the audience to intensify the lighting effects on the stage. These two innovations, combined with the unusual double proscenium of the stage, obliterate the conventional perception of space whereby the images on the stage are perceived far from the audience but with the vividness of proximity (Ibid: 254). As a result, the images on the stage appear to the audience as “larger than life.” Through these techniques Wagner seeks to maintain control over *all* aspects of the spectacle as well as the mode of their reception, which allows for “the calculated production of states of regression, fascination, dream” (Ibid: 252). Coupling visual techniques with music and enveloping the audience in this total perceptual environment of the peculiarly designed theater, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total artwork) destroys the “autonomy” of the audience – the faculty of conscious reception –, dominating and absorbing it by isolating its attention and fixing its gaze on the spectacle (Ibid 253). The effects on the audience are nothing short of “*hypnotism* by means of music” and “persuasion by the *nerves*”, which implicitly operate on an understanding of the exclusively psychophysiological constitution of the *fin-de-siècle* subject (Ibid: 252, emphasis added). By skillfully manipulating the calculated disparity between the *rationalized* construction of external stimuli and the *subrational* response this construction evokes in the spectators, or in other words, by “orchestrating” *Erlebnis*, Wagner embodies the Bergsonian idea of the “artist-as-hypnotist” as the new agent for gaining access to the unconscious (Silverman, 1989: 90).

The greatest novelty that imprints Wagner's signature on Bayreuth is expressed in stage mechanics. The stage mechanism that constitutes the core element of Wagnerian opera is essentially a technical edifice which functions through the assembly of aesthetic fragments (images, figures, props) in spectacular configurations which maximize the visual effects, or in other words, the exhibition value of these fragments. However, while this technique expands the room for artistic experimentation, it also jeopardizes the integrity and the experiential effect of the spectacle through "demystification." Recognition by the spectators of the technical construction of the spectacle exposes the reality of mechanical production and their subjective participation in the generation of visual experience. Wagner eliminates this threat by lowering the orchestra and the stage mechanism below the stage, which not only prevents distraction by the movement of the musicians and the technical apparatus, but also conceals the source of music and motion on the stage. Concealing the process of production endows Wagnerian opera with a "phantasmagoric" power which conjures up a semblance of reality from which cold, rational, fragmenting and alienating aspects of the technical-industrial machinery that governs modern life are excluded. This semblance has the primary "compensatory function" of providing a totalizing, closed and meaningful experience which alleviates the anxiety incurred by subjective fragmentation, alienation, and sensual impoverishment, on the one hand, and the dissolution of intelligible social forms and loss of signification, on the other. In this respect, Wagnerian opera becomes a "consoling phantasmagoria" which functions by superimposing an aesthetic form on an essentially fragmented, rhizomatic perceptual field and by creating a totalizing metaphysics by making use of every technological resource at its disposal (Buck-Morss, 1992: 25).

At this point, Susan Buck-Morss argues, phantasmagoria as a techno-aesthetic constellation emerges as an “*anaesthetic*”, “a narcotic ... made out of reality itself” which operates not by numbing the sensorium but by flooding it with rationally calculated and technologically fashioned sensory stimuli administered in a controlled environment (Ibid: 22). In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin notes the pervasiveness of phantasmagorical spaces in 19th Century Europe exemplified by shopping arcades, panoramas and dioramas, and World Exhibitions, which envelop spectators in phantasmagorias of commodities, nature, technology, and progress. The most significant effect of these phantasmagorias is their collective reception and the experience of them as an objective fact, which makes “the definition of ‘art’ as a sensual experience that distinguishes itself precisely by its separation from reality” difficult to sustain (Ibid: 23). From this perspective, Wagnerian opera constitutes the “perfection of the illusion that the work of art is reality *sui generis*” (Adorno, 1981: 85, quoted in Buck-Morss, 1992: 24).

The compensatory nature of phantasmagorical reality entails a kind of sensory addiction, which, coupled with its character as a collective experience, makes it a potent means of social control. A crucial aspect of Wagner’s “social functionalism” can be understood against this background. In a milieu where the traditional forms of social cohesion are irredeemably destroyed, the only conceivable method for social (re)integration that remains is the “welding of individuals into a social unity” by imposing a “uniform mode of perception and response” (Crary, 1999: 247), and Wagnerian opera strives to fulfill precisely this function. To this purpose, Wagner fuses a technical and psychophysiological *modus operandi* with a mythological narrative in an attempt to actualize the 19th Century fantasy of “recuperating myth and tragedy”, so that

the lost transcendence can be compensated by art's recovery of the "mythological figure, where humanity (a *people*, for example), could recognize itself" (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1994, quoted in Crary 1999: 257, emphasis added). In this regard, in addition to its compensatory function for redressing subjective fragmentation (the trauma of the *corps morcelé*), Wagnerian opera can be understood as an experiment in the search for a way to contain the energies of the amorphous urban masses by molding them into a social form, that finds expression in the figure of the *Volk*. Wagner's project of effecting social reintegration by fabricating collective cultural experience around artistic rituals – in other words, its aspiration to *give form to life* through art – positions it on the threshold beyond which lies the aestheticization of politics. The Wagnerian method of containing the energies of the masses through the superimposition of an aesthetic form carries in it a disastrous potential: insofar as these methods can be employed to contain unconscious energies, they harbor a capacity for mobilizing and directing them to political purposes. As I discuss below, this is what Nazi aesthetics achieves by utilizing another phantasmagorical spectacle, namely, the cinema, which carries Wagnerian principles one step further and constitutes the apex of the aestheticization of politics in the early 20th Century. Nazi aesthetics rests on a particular modality of phantasmagoria, namely, "monumentalism", whose political function is to co-opt the past and the future in an eternal, monumental present that excludes both memory and contingency.

Monumentalism is a particular form of phantasmagoria that relates the dimension of history to that of spatiality, in which a sense of temporal permanence and closure is secured by an ordered, rational aesthetics of the surface. Involved in this process is the spatialization of time, whereby history is understood and accounted for in terms of spatial

configurations. In this sense, the 19th Century metropolis constitutes a "*Zeitraum*" ("time-space"), which is concurrent with its character as a "*Zeit-traum*" ("time-dream"), that is, the dream-like experience of phantasmagoria (as in Bayreuth) that leaves its imprint on modern urban life (Gilloch, 1996: 104). The German word *Traum* is also related to the notion of a "wound" or "trauma" in the psyche that results from the painful, fragmented and estranged experience of time that characterizes this period. Phantasmagoria, and more specifically monumentalism, functions as a remedy to this temporal traumatization by casting the expression of time into visible, material and closed spatial arrangements. For example, the linear display of technological artefacts in World Exhibitions and of historical artefacts in museums offers a phantasmagorical display of history in which modernity is perceived as the terminal of a "chain of events with unbroken, historical continuity to the realization of social utopia, a heaven of class harmony and material abundance" (Buck-Morss, 1989: 95). Thus, spatialization becomes the primary means through which the past is co-opted by the present. The staging of the past as somehow predestined to the present culminates in the notion that the past, having completed its mission, is now dead and should thus be "eradicated (bulldozer), catalogued (museum) or glorified (monument)" (Gilloch, 1996: 129). This last path of cooptation is distinguished from previous ones insofar as by glorifying the past, it not only reifies and emasculates its revolutionary potential for critical remembrance (*mémoire involontaire*), it also transforms the past into a buttress for perpetuating the present.

Monumentalization is a formal-aesthetic operation that assembles fragmented pieces in a way that endows them with the surface appearance of an impervious totality, and thus with a sense of permanence and closure. Thus, monumentalism subordinates the

modern technological principle of fragmentation and reassembly to the aesthetics of the aura which defines the decadent theory of "*l'art pour l'art*." As such, it represents the reactionary reception of the new technology, in which the latter is used to transform contingency (the future subsisting as possibility in the present) into an auratic, monumental present that becomes a flawless crystal of the future (Caygill, 1998: 95). The effort to freeze the present and close it off to changes incurred by the passage of time translates into an attempt to uphold the existing relations of domination – including class oppression, imperialism, exploitation of nature – against the revolutionary potential of modernity that can be mobilized – above all, by the proletariat – for a radical reconfiguration of society. In this respect, monumentalism presents a "monumental" instance of the employment of aesthetics in the service of politics.

The monumental aesthetics of Fascism finds a context of operation in the amorphous urban masses composed of atomized, fragmented and alienated individuals, whose experience of the world is the uprooted, estranged and amnesic mode of *Erlebnis*. The naked life of the masses constitutes the raw material of Fascist politics, which consists of superimposing on the former the overarching social form of the *Volk*. This political project is actualized through an aesthetic and *anaesthetic* operation, in which *Erlebnis* is organized in the phantasmagoric constellation of the "monumental mass." Under Fascism, the society itself becomes a mass auratic artwork, in which "the surface pattern, as an abstract representation of reason becomes dominant form of depicting the social body" (Buck-Morss, 1992: 35). This aesthetics of the surface gives back to the observer "a reassuring perception of the rationality of the whole of the social body, which when viewed from his or her own particular body is perceived as a threat to wholeness"

(Ibid). In the images of the geometrically organized configuration of bodies on the Nazi rally grounds, the individual perceives himself or herself to be part of this integral whole, which appears to be impervious to the passage of time. The monumentalization of the masses has its parallel in the monumentalization of the individual body in the Nazi art that depicts the “steeled bodies” of German soldiers and athletes, and is suggestive of the Nazi obsession with “armored” warfare. The idea of “the body as an armor against fragmentation” manifests itself cinematographically in the homology between the individual bodies in Leni Riefenstahl’s *Olympia 1. Teil – Fest der Völker* and the orderly columns of bodies in *Triumph des Willens*. With a single move, Fascist aesthetics simultaneously compensates for the trauma of the *corps morcelé* and captures the naked life of the masses in an intelligible and tractable social form.

The fascist monumentalization of the masses hinges on the reproduction of the auratic experience with camera technology, which, through panoramic view, enlargement and intensive editing, depicts the mass as a totality from which contingency is expelled. The self-contained work of “*l’art pour l’art*” is fused with self-presentation of the masses as a monumental design, which incarnates an aestheticized philosophy of history and converts the present into an impermeable work of art for mass contemplation (Caygill, 1998: 96). The pivotal function of the camera in Fascist aesthetics resides in its ability to fuse in the masses the double role as object and as observer of the process of monumentalization, as when it provides a medium by which a bird’s-eye-view of the orderly masses can be presented to the very individuals who constitute them. “In big parades and monster rallies, in sports events, and in war, all of which nowadays are captured by camera and sound recording, the masses are brought *face to face with*

themselves” (Benjamin, 1969A: 251, emphasis added). Hence, the ingenuity of Nazi aesthetics, which places it one step ahead of Wagner, consists in how it provides the masses with the opportunity to watch and celebrate themselves as a constitutive element of the phantasmagoria. Wagner believes that opera is “a mirror in which a community could see itself reflected”, whereby “the sense of vision serves to reinforce one’s place in the social whole” (Crary, 1999: 248). Making the most of the technical means at his disposal, Wagner tries to create an image on the stage of Bayreuth that *symbolically* reflects the community (the German *Volk*) he has in mind, whereas Riefenstahl deploys her camera *literally* to reflect the community that is shaped and mobilized by Nazism for militarization and war. Through the medium of film the convolution of body-space and image-space is taken to the extreme in the semblance of a “body-scape”, and the aesthetic constellation of the spectacle itself is constructed exclusively out of bodily, naked life stripped of all historical and social particularities. The appropriation of this aesthetic operation by politics culminates in the aestheticization of the latter and leads to the politicization of life. This convergence of aesthetics, politics and naked life is nowhere more clearly expressed than by Joseph Goebbels, minister of propaganda in the Nazi Party: ‘We who shape modern German politics feel ourselves to be artistic people, entrusted with the great responsibility of forming out of the raw material of the masses a solid, well-wrought structure of a *Volk*’ (quoted in Buck-Morss, 1992: 38).

Perhaps the most important political correlate of this peculiar phantasmagoria is that, reflected in their monumental facade, the masses appear as immutable and hence “incapable of considered and independent action” (Caygill, 1996: 116). This incapacity is both symptomatic and generative of Fascism’s great political innovation, namely, giving

the masses an outlet for expression without changing property relations (Benjamin, 1969A: 241), and it is representative of a broader ideological mode of political domination that pervades modernity, namely, the modern "myth." For Benjamin, the modern myth that prevails in the metropolis exhibits a paradoxical structure of delusion. On the one hand, while the myth claims that everyday life under modernity bursts with something new, in fact a compulsive repetition fills this supposed epoch of enlightenment and progress (Caygill, 1998: 104).³ On the other hand, this compulsive repetition creates a false sense of permanence that masks the actual fragility of modern society which is constantly undermined by the flux and dynamism of capitalism (Ibid: 72). In other words, in the place of supposed change, one finds endless repetition, or rather, the persistence of the archaic forms of domination such as class oppression and imperialist war; and in the place of the supposed permanence and security, there is a fundamental process of destruction (of tradition, experience and memory), as well as the possibility that the established bourgeois order will be vulnerable to social revolution. Although these two forms of delusion may appear paradoxical, they are nevertheless complementary. Briefly put, the only way to secure a sense of temporal permanence and social closure in the face of the modernist destruction of tradition is by closing the present off to any other future than the repetition of the status quo, and thus by conceiving of the present as the only state of affairs on which the future can be based (Ibid: 95). The inverse side of the reification of the future is the cooptation of the past in the teleology of an eternal present. Hence this philosophy of history is governed under the mythic sign of "predestination":

³ One of the illuminating instances of this compulsive repetition is the repetitive work that characterizes the industrial factory (the "toil of Sisyphus", as Engels puts it), which is misrecognized as the site *par excellence* of social progress (Buck-Morss, 1989: 105). Another is the domain of fashion, where the trends of the past reappear as the most novel creations (Gilloch, 1996).

the past was predestined to the present, which embodies what we are predestined to in the future. The political implication of this fateful imposition of the existing state of affairs on society is that the present course of events cannot be resisted (Buck-Morss, 1989: 78). This belief obliterates the possibility that human agency can bring about truly new change, but in return it satisfies the "desire felt by human beings for a meaning-filled world" (Ibid.).

In the 19th Century, a wide array of social and political movements, ranging from anarchism on the one extreme to fascism on the other, wrestled over the possibilities of societal reconfiguration opened up by the breakdown of traditional structures under modernity. From this struggle, one political project emerged as the god child of modernity and successfully monopolized the function of providing a "meaning-filled" world for the great masses of people. This project is nationalism, which imposes a form of domination on the masses which is truly mythical. The mythical nature of the nation presents itself in the discrepancy between its form and its content. That is, while the conditions of its novel form reside in the destruction of tradition in the 19th Century, it claims to be historically perennial and socially exhaustive. As I discuss below, the nation represents a new auratic semblance of reality that is created and sustained by phantasmagorical constellations which are animated by the operational logic of fragmentation and reassembly, and whose political function is to give the naked life of the masses a rigorous social form suspended in an eternal present. The imposition of the aesthetico-political form of the nation on the masses constitutes the framework in which the naked life of the masses passes over into the politico-legal existence of the sovereign body of citizens, and thereby constitutes the grounds on which aesthetics, sovereign

politics and biopolitics coalesce. In order to expand upon these issues, in the following section I argue that the deployment of the perspective developed thus far calls for a reassessment of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* and Eric Hobsbawm's *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780* together with the works of Giorgio Agamben.

IV. The Politicization of Naked Life: Imagined Community, Law, and Citizenship

Anderson traces the possibilities of imagining the nation as a community to the dissolution of premodern forms of social and political imagination, such as religious cosmology and dynastic politics characterized by a Messianic apprehension of time (Anderson, 1991). Reading the argument along Benjaminian lines, religious cosmology, that of Christianity in particular, constitutes a “traditional” frame of reference which is governed by a “visual and aural” imagination (Ibid: 23). The prevalence of tradition in this cosmology manifests itself in how signs and symbols are embedded in historical webs of representation, signification and memory. The sensibility that governs these webs is premised on the principle of specificity and particularity, which materializes in such religious artworks as reliefs, stained-glass windows and relics (Ibid). These artworks are the primary examples of the traditional auratic works of art that Benjamin discusses in his Artwork essay and defines in terms of the “cult value” that accrues from their utilization in religious rituals such as fables, sermons and morality plays. It is not hard to infer that the mode of experience that reigns in the imagined community of Christendom is *Erfahrung*, which finds itself at home in a world governed by a deeply rooted historical tradition conveyed through the Church, cultic ritual (religious sermons and plays), and narratives (tales and myths). The arch-principle that organizes the imagination of the religious community is the “non-arbitrariness of the sign”, which for Anderson finds its characteristic instance in the religious script. Latin as a signifying system is the “emanation of reality, not randomly fabricated representation of it” (Ibid: 14). The ideograms in the Script are themselves more akin to auratic artworks that testify to a

cultural heritage than they are artificial constructs for communication. For this reason, the fall of Latin from its privileged status as the language of truth in favor of national vernaculars does not only concern the technical issue of communicability but is also a symptom of the destruction of tradition and the demise of the cult value of cultural artefacts. The disintegration of Latin "exemplified a larger process in which the sacred communities integrated by old sacred languages were gradually fragmented, pluralized, and territorialized" (Ibid: 19).

For Anderson, the decisive force behind the pulverization of religious cosmology in the modern era is print capitalism, which signals "the onset of Benjamin's 'age of mechanical reproduction'" (Ibid 37). In opposition to the singularity and authenticity of the premodern sign, the prime features of print knowledge are infinite reproducibility and dissemination. This age inaugurates what has been discussed earlier as the dislocation of the cultural elements from tradition by destroying their authenticity and transforming them into arbitrary signs. This process manifests itself most clearly in the new accessibility and availability of the holy script in vernaculars through the printing press, which breaks down the cult value of the written sign and transforms it into an abstract medium premised on its sheer visibility, or exhibition value. This new arbitrariness of the sign facilitates the "assembly" of related local idiolects into print-languages that would later constitute the core of national languages, and thus the means of communication and exchange by which the nation as a community can be imagined (Ibid: 44). A crucial effect of this development is the appearance of fixity that these print languages acquire, on the basis of which the national community can lay claim to a perennial existence by tracing its origins in the mythical past of its language. In effect then the auratic

experience of the past is reproduced by technical means (fragmentation and reassembly) which endow the language (in reality a semi-artificial construct) with the aura of the "soul" of the national identity (Hobsbawm, 1990: 54-7).

The popular reception of the constructed vernacular as the eternal essence of the nation is based on the annihilation of tradition and memory and the separation of cosmology from history, from which emerges the collective amnesia and the fragmentation of experience that is characteristic of modernity. By unraveling the fabric of tradition and displacing the cultural points of reference, modernity engenders a new apprehension of time that is empty and homogenous, in which the sense of a radical break with the past – "the blasting open the continuum of history" – flourishes (Anderson, 1991: 24, 193). Empty, homogenous time can be conceptualized as a "temporal *Spielraum*" in which the uprooted traditional elements in their pure sign-form can be rearticulated for the construction of the national myth that is central to the national imagination. This process is exemplified by Hobsbawm in his account of the appropriation of traditional, pre-national "feelings of collective belonging" by the project of nation-building (Hobsbawm, 1990: 46). In the 19th Century, Hobsbawm argues, language, religion, ethnicity, and holy icons constituted traditional collective bonds, which he captures with the term "protonationalism." Hobsbawm emphasizes the contingency of the relationship between the protonationalist elements and the nation itself, and holds that these elements only become "national" through their mobilization behind a modern cause or a modern state (Ibid: 47, 77). This is evident in the historical accounts he provides of the "use" of language as a criterion of national membership, the "invention" of ethnicity by the nationalist movements, the "amenability" of religion for

differentiating from other nations, and the “evocation” of holy icons to buttress national imaginary (Ibid: 51-54, 65-71). The success of forging a national identity out of protonationalisms is conditional on the destruction of tradition, that is, on the emancipation of these cultural elements from the webs of historical signification in which they are embedded. This is evidenced by the staunch resistance of tribal ethnicity against nationalist co-optation (Ibid: 64), which stems from the fact that the bearers of this particular sense of ethnic belonging, namely, the tribal communities, are usually on the margins of modernization, and thus remain relatively protected from its fragmenting and dislocating effects by retaining their roots in tradition.

Among the protonationalisms examined by Hobsbawm, holy icons, understood as shared images and practices of locality, religion and ethnicity, ranging from flags and Virgin Mary figures to Olympic festivals, occupy a unique position in the life of the nation, for they represent “symbols and rituals or common collective practices which alone give a palpable reality to otherwise imaginary community” (Ibid: 71). As such, holy icons belong to the domain of art where the destruction of the auratic becomes most salient. As holy icons are emancipated from the traditional rituals that once comprised the source of their cult value, they become available for rearticulation around the national myth solely by virtue of their exhibition value. As the traditional foundation of art crumbles, it ceases to be based on ritual and instead “it begins to be based on another practice – politics” (Benjamin, 1969A: 224). The politics at stake here primarily consists of the endeavor to erect a patrimony of national myth, which now becomes the exclusive source of meaning and authority (in the double sense of the word) for the traditional constituents thus rearticulated. The void left by the destruction of traditional historicity of

the protonationalisms is filled by the *political* historicity of the nation, which retrospectively imbues these elements with a national aura, and engenders a fateful imaginary in which religion, ethnicity, language and locality appear as predestined to the *telos* of the eternal, monumental present of the nation.⁴ It is only with reference to this mythical notion of predestination, of “having always been there”, that it becomes possible to apprehend the subjective claims of the nation to historical perennialism – that the nation has its roots in antiquity – and to social exhaustiveness – that every individual must have a nation just as he or she has a gender.

The discussion above should not mislead one to think that imagining nation takes place primarily at a discursive level restricted to the elite and the intelligentsia of nationalist movements. Rather, forging the national imaginary involves the “invitation of the masses into history”, that is, into participating in the nation as the transcendent historical subject (Anderson, 1991: 80). I contend that this invitation and participation is effected through phantasmagorical constellations which uphold an auratic semblance of the “nation-scape.” These constellations provide a compensatory reality that engenders a coherent sense of individual and collective subjectivity and a meaning-filled world against modern fragmentation and loss of meaning. In this respect, national rallies and commemorations, as in the poignant example of Nazis discussed earlier, constitute phantasmagorias through which it becomes possible to imagine a coherent and

⁴ A most revealing example of the appropriation of the traditional elements by the nationalist myth is found in Martin Luther Memorial Church in Berlin, the last remaining Nazi era church in Germany. The pulpit of the church has a wooden carving that depicts “a muscular Jesus leading a helmeted Wehrmacht soldier and surrounded by an Aryan family” (Crossland, 2006). More important than the outrageous anachronism of the image is the juxtaposition of two irreconcilable figures – the Semite Jesus who blesses the meek and the Aryan soldier who represents an anti-Semitic regime that embraces the motto “might is right.” However, the perplexity surrounding this imagery dissipates when one considers that the Jesus in this carving is no longer the Jesus of the Christian tradition, but an uprooted cultural artifact which is now useful in *political* (as opposed to religious) rituals by virtue of its exhibition value.

meaningful national body politic. Anderson draws attention to two other major avenues that enable the imagining of the nation, namely, national maps and museums.⁵ These phantasmagorias constitute what Anderson calls "totalizing classificatory grids", which can apparently be extended to anything under the state's control with endless flexibility, and which produce the appearance of bounded, determinate and meaningful totalities (Ibid: 184).

National museums operate by imposing the totalizing grid of the national myth on historical artefacts and places ranging from clothes and pottery to guns and monumental sites which have been wrested from the traditional domains of locality, religion and ethnicity. By assigning these artefacts and sites to their place at specific points in history and by sequentializing them in a linear order of display, museumization becomes a major means by which the historiography of the national myth is endowed with a tangible reality. Anderson explores this process around the monumental archeology that increasingly pervaded the Southeast Asian colonial and nation-building projects in the late 19th Century, where the state assumes a position as "guardian of a generalized, but also local, Tradition" (Ibid: 181). Anderson's capitalization of the word Tradition is not accidental, as it points towards the distinction between, on the one hand, the authentic tradition whose disintegration gives birth to the *Spielraum* in which the nation-state erects the auratic semblance of the nation-scape, and on the other, the mythical Tradition of the national imaginary that accrues from this process of technical reproduction of the auratic.

⁵ Anderson investigates the role of national maps and museums in the context of Southeast Asia. In this geography the colonial powers utilize the techniques of representation developed and perfected at home for imagining their dominion, but more importantly, these techniques are later "politically inherited" by the national governments of the postcolonial countries in the region, which deploy them for their own nation-building projects (Anderson, 1991: 178).

This point is corroborated by Anderson's observation that the process of museumization rests on the infinite reproducibility of images of historical artefacts through print and photography (hence, the destruction of their uniqueness and their reduction to sheer exhibition value), but more importantly on the disbelief among the national elite in the sacredness of the artefacts and sites themselves (thus discarding their cult value) (Ibid: 182). Benjamin's historical insight into the supplanting of traditional ritual by its political counterpart as the new basis of the artwork is relevant here, for the very destruction of the unique and reverential quality of these artefacts and sites through the "quotidian of infinite reproducibility"; Anderson argues, is "profoundly political" (Ibid: 183), and testifies to the power of the nation-state in combining the "heritage of sections, regions and localities" into an "all-national heritage" (Hobsbawm, 1990: 90). Anderson notes that these historical artefacts and monumental sites are always accompanied by explanatory tablets (Anderson, 1991: 182) which fasten them to their position in the temporal unfolding and discursive universe of the national myth. This point resonates with Benjamin's observation that as photographs acquire a "hidden political significance" at the turn of the century, they begin to demand "a specific kind of approach", which makes it obligatory that photographs be accompanied by captions that give "directives" to the spectators (Benjamin, 1969A: 226). Both of these instances testify to the mounting indecipherability of a world in which the function of maintaining a coherent and meaningful semblance of reality is progressively monopolized by politics.

The temporal *Spielraum* in which the historiography of the national myth operates finds its counterpart in a "spatial *Spielraum*", an abstract, homogenous and empty space that constitutes the grounds for the national map. This new sense of space is premised on

purging a region of its physical and cultural specificities, which form the organizing principle of the traditional maps drawn for religious purposes ("cosmographs") as well as for military campaigns and trading activities (Anderson, 1991: 171). A stark contrast becomes evident between the symbolism and utility (cult and use-value) of traditional maps and the pure visibility (exhibition value) of national maps. This pure visibility freed from the actual particularities of a region constitutes the medium on which the national borders are drawn, which do not necessarily correspond to the geographical features of a region, but occur where the "vertical interfaces between *state sovereignties* intersect the surface of the earth" (Ibid: 172, emphasis added). This is again in contrast with the traditional maps whose primary function is not to mark borders, and testifies to the essentially political organization of spatiality in national maps.

This synthetic political activity of forging a spatial totality that does not correspond to lived historical reality crystallizes in what Anderson characterizes as "historical maps" and "map-as-logo" (Ibid 174-5). As in museumization, historical maps proceed through the spatialization of time, whereby they give the mythical historiography of the nation (that is, the national predestination) conspicuous visibility by depicting the successive stages of the "national borders" dating back to antiquity and ultimately culminating in the present territory of the nation. The function of historical maps in buttressing the mythical notion of predestination is complemented by the map-as-logo that serves to perpetuate the sense of predestined, eternal present by monumentalizing contemporary national borders. It achieves this effect by detaching the national territory from its geographical context and inserting it into a technologically reproducible series as pure sign. Through its ubiquity and its actualization in everyday settings – "on posters,

officials seals, letterheads, magazine and textbook covers, tablecloths and hotel walls" –, the logo-map penetrates deep into the popular imagination (Ibid: 175). The phantasmagorical quality of the logo-map is twofold. First, the process of production – the effacement of history from the national territory and the arbitrary, political imposition of national borders – is excluded from representation. Second, the omnipresence of the logo-map functions as a "techno-aesthetics" that fashions the perceptual environment enveloping the masses, and creates a particular, that is, a "national" subject-effect. This environment involves a specific distribution of bodies *vis-à-vis* the national map (and this also holds true for the national flag), which is premised on the incessant exposure of the former to the latter. In line with the intimate relationship between externally fashioned stimuli and subrational responses established by 19th Century psychophysiology, as discussed above, the logo-map bypasses conscious contemplation about the conditions of possibility of what it represents, and inscribes the monumental present of the nation in the subjectivity of the population.

The circumvention of conscious contemplation in capturing the imagination of the masses in national phantasmagorias helps us to understand the abyss that separates the theoretical incoherence and weakness of nationalist discourse on the one hand, and its tremendous practical strength in producing national subjectivities on the other. Anderson, along with other prominent nationalism scholars such as Tom Nairn (1977) and Hugh Seton-Watson (1977), draws attention to the fact that "[i]n contrast to the immense influence nationalism has exerted on the modern world, plausible theory about it is conspicuously meager" (Ibid: 3). I think this apparent conundrum is a correlate of the equivocal attempt to ground the process of national subject-building in theoretical-

discursive operations. Instead, I hold that nationalism's power to inspire "self-sacrificing love" and loyalty (Anderson, 1991: 141) is to a great extent irrelevant to its discursive efficacy, because the definitive medium on which the national subjects are constituted is not discursive and cognitive but rather aesthetic and psychological, and thus can only be understood against the background of the 19th Century social transformations discussed above. The "experience" of the nation is not cognitive but *psychological*; on the one hand it rests on the growing interiorization and psychologization of the individual and on the other, on the reconfiguration of politics as the manipulation and molding of this psychological subject through (an)aesthetic practices. Hence, nationalism's success in transforming "fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning" (Ibid: 11) should not be sought at the contemplative level, because, as I tried to outline in length earlier, the period that witnesses the heyday of nation-building is characterized by the very destruction of the conscious-contemplative interface that mediated subject-object relationships prior to modernity (This is why Hobsbawm calls nationalism a "civic religion" whose hallmark is not reason but faith (Hobsbawm, 1990: 85)). Instead, the enormous popularity and sway that nationalism commands in this period is based on its historical ability to manage the aestheticization of politics, through which it captures the imagination of individuals and masses alike in national phantasmagorias that create and uphold the compensatory reality of the nation. The dissolution of the individual sensorium into a perceptual field of forces and energies, and the enthrallment of the individual subject by the calculated engineering of that field in phantasmagorical constellations, find their political counterparts in the dissolution of the individual body

into the amorphous body of the masses, and by the capture of the naked life of the individual by the political act of giving these masses the form of the nation.

So far I have tried to outline the aesthetico-political operational logic that underlies the imagining of the nation. However, as Anderson makes clear in the beginning of his work, the nation is imagined not only as a community, but as an irreducibly *sovereign* community (Anderson, 1991: 7). The capture of naked life in the mythical structure of the nation through the superimposition of aesthetic forms finds political expression through the inscription of this life in the juridical order of the nation in which sovereignty materializes. The mythical imposition of the reality of the nation becomes visible in its entanglement with the notion of "fate" (a predestined present), the quintessential domain of which for Benjamin is law (Benjamin, 1978F: 307). The mythical structure of law springs from the premise that a society over which law does not rule is unimaginable. In this political mytholegame, the very possibility of society is based on the establishment of an "order" (*nomos*), which comes into being through an act of violence that puts an end to the disorder (*chaos*) of the fictive state of nature by annulling the natural violence that individuals wield against one another in this state. Benjamin calls this ordering violence which constitutes the founding moment of society "lawmaking violence." However, as lawmaking violence institutes an order, it does not dismiss violence but "it specifically establishes as law not an end unalloyed by violence, but one necessarily and intimately bound to it, under the title of power" (Benjamin, 1978V: 295). In other words, at the moment a juridical order is established by lawmaking violence, the latter assumes the character of "law-preserving violence", the sole aim of which is not simply to maintain the specific legal ends that this order involves, but the

very order itself. The hidden premise behind law-preserving violence is that while specific laws can fail to exhaustively cover all possible instances of life, the juridical order as a whole admits no lacunae, for each lacuna represents the chaos of nature which threatens society with dissolution (Agamben, 2005: 31). For this reason, the main principle of operation of the juridical order cannot be the realization of legal ends through the execution of particularistic laws, but preservation of the legal order as such is ensured by the threat or exercise of a formless, ambiguous, and *inescapable* violence.

Under the nation-state, the inescapability of the power that individuals find themselves subjected to is inscribed within the mythical narrative of the imagined community of the nation which parallels and is drawn upon by the mythical structure of law. The belief in the predestined, eternal present of the nation, which is upheld by national phantasmagorias as discussed above, makes one's membership in the nation appear as fate. As such, being imagined as part of the national body politic entails one's fateful subjection to the sovereign power that this body incarnates and represents in its juridical system. The specific laws that the juridical system involves are not of decisive importance, for these can be changed or even suspended when necessity or emergency dictates it. In this regard, the violence that the nation-state inflicts on the individuals under its jurisdiction should be understood less as a punishment of legal transgressions than as the materialization of national sovereignty, through which the *existence* of the nation as the locus of supreme power and individuals' fateful subjection to it are affirmed. Thus, the imagined community of the nation and the national law are intimately connected insofar as the former sustains the belief that being part of the nation is one's

destiny and as the latter gives this belief a politico-juridical reality by subjugating individuals to the sovereign power of the nation-state.

Emergence of sovereign power as incarnated in the body of the nation can be located in a historical shift from a politics of transcendence to a politics of immanence that characterizes the rise of the nation-state. In the Ancien Regime the ultimate source of law was God, which stands above and apart from the subjects over which divine law rules. Furthermore, the subjection of human beings to divine law is essentially mediated insofar as execution is carried out by the king and the clergy and the principles of application are prescribed by a holy script written in Latin that is inaccessible to subjects. Classical sovereignty is exercised from above, passes through intermediary bodies, and is thus porous and imperfect in capturing every human being in its field of jurisdiction.⁶ The dissolution of the dynastic realm and the secularization of politics that accompany the rise of the nation-state put an end to hierarchical mediations in politics and introduced a politics of immanence, whereby the body of the nation in its entirety becomes the sole source *and* target of sovereign power. The abolition of the politically relevant differences in inherited status that characterized the Ancien Regime by bourgeois revolutions of the late 18th Century that gave birth to the nation-state culminates in what Karl Löwith calls “the total politicization of everything” (Löwith, 1984, quoted in Agamben, 1998: 121). The total politicization of life manifests itself most clearly in the location of sovereign power within the body of the nation. In the national body politic, the subject and the object of sovereign power (and the violence this power wields) enter a zone of indistinction in which sovereignty is lodged in the body of every individual that partakes

⁶ When Michel Foucault discusses in an interview – later published under the title “Truth and Power” (1980) – the end of sovereignty as the dominant form of politics in the 18th and 19th Centuries, it is classical sovereignty whose demise he outlines.

in the nation and is thus extended exhaustively to the entire body politic. Participation in the nation thus involves a process of “double subjectification” whereby individuals simultaneously comprise the sovereign subject of the nation – effected through their participation in national phantasmagorias – and are subjected to the very same sovereignty – manifested in their subordination to the juridical order of the nation-state.⁷

This dual character of political subjectivity finds its first historical expression in the French “Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen” of 1789, which provides a glimpse into the originary moment of modern politics in which the naked life of “Man” is inscribed in the juridical order of the nation-state through the sovereign subjectivity of the “Citizen”. The relationship between the two figures is never clarified in the Declaration. Instead, as Agamben insightfully elaborates, the legal inscription of subjectivity has a circular logic in which rights are first attributed to man at the quintessential moment of naked life, that is, at his “birth”; second, this figure of naked life instantly vanishes into the figure of the citizen where these rights are “preserved”; and third, the political existence or sovereignty is attributed to the “nation” in which the element of birth (*nascere*) is already inscribed in its very core and which “thus closes the open circle of man’s birth” (Agamben, 1998: 128). The fictive equations of birth=nation and nation=state=territory constitute a juridical matrix that subsumes naked life under law, nature under culture, and *physis* under *nomos*, without leaving a remainder. The total sovereignty of the nation-state over its territory, together with the mythical historiography of the nation, exhausts both spatial and temporal routes of exodus from the national

⁷ Hence, the process of double subjectification – production of autonomous subjects and their simultaneous subjection to power – theorized by Foucault (1990) with respect to disciplinary forms of power also holds true for sovereign power under modernity.

juridical order, and renders its violence over naked life truly mythical, that is, fatefully imposed.

The Declaration of Rights that stands as the tombstone of the Ancien Regime reveals the primary function of modern national sovereignty, which is to *produce* naked life by divesting it of all of its forms for the purpose of inscribing it in the juridical order of the nation-state (Agamben, 2000L: 6). Life that can be invested with and subjected to sovereignty cannot have a prior form – for example, as member of this estate, belonging to this race, representative of this class, and so forth – but has to be a formless “raw” material, that is, pure biological life that can then be shaped through the sovereign politics of the nation-state. In other words, the modern citizen can only be made out of biological life, and the nation must be forged out of amorphous masses.⁸ Naked, natural life which was kept strictly separate as *zoē* from political life as *bios* in the Ancient *polis*, and which belongs exclusively to God in the Ancien Regime (subject “to” and not “of” sovereign power), now appears in modernity as the foundation stone of the sphere of sovereign politics.⁹ An illuminating example of the imposition of political order on naked life is the crucial role played by compulsory education in nation-building, in which the naked life (*physis*) of the child is pulled into the sphere of political order (*nomos*) by imposing a uniform national language (*logos*) onto it.¹⁰ Hobsbawm unwittingly makes

⁸ That the particular definition of politics as giving form to life is not restricted to the nation-state (though it finds its ultimate culmination there) but presents the new paradigm of modern politics is evident in Benjamin's observation that Marx “early recognized it as his task to forge the amorphous mass, which was then being wooed by an aesthetic socialism, into the iron of the proletariat” (Benjamin, 1968B: 166).

⁹ This suggests, against Foucault's (1977, 1980) contention, that the institution of naked life as the foundation of modern politics in general and of the nation-state in particular which marks the threshold of biopolitics develops not in the void left by sovereignty's demise but is entangled with its immanent modality.

¹⁰ Compulsory education, although one of the “hard” institutional processes of the nation-building, is not devoid of spectacular-phantasmagorical qualities. This can be observed in the theatricality of the scene presented by Eugene Weber (1976) in his book *Peasants into Frenchmen* where he notes that “The

this point when he notes that before the introduction of mass education the “monoglot Breton” is “little better than a dumb *animal ... a mute bundle of muscles*”, which is turned into a Frenchman, a citizen, through the acquisition of national language and symbols (Hobsbawm, 1990: 115, emphasis added).

The modern relationship between the naked life of man and the political existence of the citizen begins to present its first symptoms as early as the period of French Revolution, when Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès distinguished the passive (civil) and active (political, sovereign) rights of the citizen and excluded from the latter “women ... children, foreigners, and also those who would not at all contribute to the public establishment” (Sieyès, 1985, quoted in Agamben, 1998: 130). Here one can glimpse the biopolitical rift that runs through the sovereign body politic, whereby civil rights belonging to the naked life of man are distinguished from political rights reserved for the political existence of the citizen. This fracture, which is originally concealed by the equation of nation and birth, began to surface in the 1870s when the inadequacy of this equation as a basis for citizenship became perceptible. In France, and with the national unification of Germany and Italy, “the national question” of defining certain criteria with which to draw the contours of the imagined community gained utmost urgency (Hobsbawm, 1990: 101-106, 108, 112). The imposition of such criteria as ethnicity, race, religion and language by the nation-state as prerequisites for citizenship in this period attests to the fact that mere birth was ultimately insufficient for endowing naked life with political existence. In other words, the threshold between man and the citizen, although effected in the last instance in the juridical sphere, increasingly became a function of the

schoolteachers, in their worn, dark suits, appear as the militia of the new age, harbingers of Enlightenment and of the Republican message that reconciled the benighted masses with a new world, superior in wellbeing and democracy” (Weber, 1976: 303)

way in which the nation was imagined as a sovereign and bounded community. Who is cherished by and who is excluded from the national myth, who participates in national rallies, whose historical artefacts and relics are displayed in museums and in what fashion – these questions drew lines between those who were eligible to participate in the citizenship that defined the sovereign body politic, and those who were not worthy of such a privilege. Thus it is in the imagined community of the nation that the politics of “redefinition of the relationships between man and citizen” finds its medium of operation (Agamben, 1998: 130).

If the “national question” presented symptoms of the growing inadequacy of the “birth=nation” equation, the latter entered a true crisis with the First World War (Agamben, 2000C: 43). The Wilsonian principle of national self-determination that envisions the congruence of ethnically and linguistically homogenous populations and nation-states culminated in the mass expulsion and extermination of minorities during and after the War (Hobsbawm, 1990: 133). With this principle the fictive conflation of birth and citizenship collapses insofar as some lives cannot be inscribed into the politico-judicial order of the nation by virtue of nativity. One effect of designating some lives, in spite of their place of birth, as a threat to the integrity of the body politic is mass “denaturalization”, which resulted in this period in the divestiture of millions of Armenians, Greeks, Bulgarians, Germans, Hungarians and Romanians of their citizenship rights and their reduction to the status of stateless people, or refugees (Agamben, 2000H: 17). The mythical character of law that governs the juridical inscription of naked life is revealed in the notorious ambiguity of the grounds on which laws of denaturalization were passed, such as being of “enemy origin” in France (1915), committing “antinational

acts" in Belgium (1922), and showing oneself "undeserving of Italian citizenship" in Italy (1926) (Ibid: 18). However, the most well-known example of denaturalization is Nuremberg Laws of 1935 in Germany, which, echoing Sieyès, divided German citizens into citizens with full rights and citizens without political rights, and then took this act of divestiture to the next level by stripping German Jews of civil status as well and thereby opening the way to their extermination in camps.

The consequences of denaturalization are aggravated by the mythical structure of the nation and the power-tight boundaries of the nation-state, which in principle do not allow for a space in Europe over which mythical violence does not rule. Without any legal protection, the naked lives of the refugees are subjected by definition to the unmediated violence of a nation-state in whose territory they happen to find themselves. The foundation of the lines of exclusion on the borders of the imagined community from the late 19th Century onwards, coupled with the uncertain and ever-shifting character of these borders, requires the constant effort of "proving oneself worthy of citizenship", the success of which in the face of the mythical ambiguity of the nationalist ideology and citizenship laws always remains far from certain (Agamben, 1998: 132).

V. Conclusion

In this thesis I have tried to present an alternative approach to the understanding of the nation by positing aesthetics as an indispensable medium for the imagination of this community. My focus on the role of aesthetics in the making of subjectivities in general, and political – national – subjectivities in particular has been highly specific, in that I have refrained from engaging in a discussion about the “hard” institutional processes of modern nation-building. The production of subjectivities in the modern period through the subjection of bodies to disciplinary practices in such institutions as barracks, schools, factories, hospitals, and prisons, which constitutes the primary means by which a national body is materially created, has been meticulously and elaborately investigated by Foucault and others. If one would consider these institutions as “generators” in a network of national subject production, my concern in this thesis has been with the “relay stations” or “conduits” that punctuate this network and disseminate the effects of these generators to the surface of the social body. I have located these conduits in the domain of aesthetics, particularly in the phenomenon of phantasmagorical spectacle, which has directed my designation of specific cases – panoramas, exhibitions, theaters, museums – as loci in which the operational logic of dissemination and inscription of subjectivities can be observed. With an analysis centered around aesthetics, I have attempted to point towards an alternative genealogy of modernity in general and of the nation in particular, the aim of which is not to replace but to qualify and complement the existing accounts.

In the course of the discussion, I have tried to demonstrate the intimate relationship between the domain of aesthetics, the field of science and the practice of

politics in 19th Century Europe, and argued that the nexus on which these three spheres converge is the notion of “naked life” conceived as bodily, biological life stripped of social, historical, and political qualities. In the first section, I traced the emergence of this notion in the “scientization of naked life” which materializes in the body of knowledge generated by the discipline of psychophysiology in the course of the 19th Century and situated within the broader “question of the subject” which refers to the growing unsustainability of the idea of a conscious-contemplative subject facing a self-identical and decipherable world. I discussed this subjective transformation in terms of the collapse of traditional, narrative experience (*Erfahrung*) into a meaningless aggregation of sensory and bodily impressions (*Erlebnisse*) that increasingly dominate the everyday life in the modern metropolis. I contended that the destruction of the contemplative interface between the object and the subject as a consequence of the demise of tradition, and its replacement by a psychological – unconscious – subject located in a rhizomatic and meaningless perceptual field, makes the (re)reproduction of a comprehensible reality the function of the external organization of this field by rational calculation and technological means.

In the second section, I proceeded to show how this scientific conceptualization of naked life and technical logic of reality maintenance inform artistic practices, which culminate in the “aestheticization of naked life.” This process involves the production of the semblance of a coherent and meaningful reality by organizing the perceptual environment in spectacular constellations in which the psychophysiological existence of individuals comprises an integral, constitutive element of the aesthetic environment. Art’s ability to forge the semblance of a meaningful reality resides in its synthetic capacities

expanded by the replacement of the cultic principle of semblance (*Schein*) by the technical principle of play (*Spiel*). These synthetic capacities single out art in *fin-de-siècle* Europe as the domain in which the fragmented subject and the shattered experience of the world can be reintegrated. Concurrent with its reintegrative function is the new mission of art to capture the unconscious energies of the urban masses – which emerge from the dissolution of traditional social structures – in the semblance of intelligible social forms by engendering a simulation of social cohesion and unity through phantasmagorical spectacles. Through an analysis of the Wagnerian opera, I tried to illustrate the homology between, on the one hand, the literal incorporation of individuals in their psychophysiological existence into the aesthetic space of the phantasmagoria, and, on the other, the capture of the amorphous masses in social forms represented in political myths that are conveyed through phantasmagoria. This comprises the moment in which aesthetics converge with politics – the “aestheticization of politics” – and the foundation for this convergence arises as naked, bodily life. I discussed “monumentalism” as the primary political function of the aestheticization of life insofar as it serves to uphold the notion of a mythical, predestined present by giving the social body a rigorous form – of the *Volk*, for example – which defies change and contingency by co-opting the past into the present and by turning the present into the crystal of the future. This aesthetico-political operation is most clearly revealed in Nazi aesthetics and particularly in the films of Leni Riefenstahl, which forge a phantasmagoria of the German *Volk* by framing bodies of the masses in flawless geometrical configurations on Nazi rally grounds – thus “giving form to life” – and monumentalizing these configurations through the technology of film.

In the third section, I looked at some of the implications that this theoretical perspective holds for the imagined community of the nation, which presents the threshold beyond which lies the "politicization of naked life." I conceptualized the nation as an aesthetic form superimposed on a fragmented social reality, which comes into existence in the temporal and spatial *Spielraum* opened up by the destruction of tradition. Such national phantasmagorias as maps and museums constitute techno-aesthetic constellations that actualize this process, the effect of which is to create and sustain the mythical present of the nation as the *telos* to which the traditional elements of ethnicity, language, religion, and locality appear as predestined. I argued that the success of nationalism in commanding self-sacrificing love and loyalty resides in the effectiveness of these phantasmagorias which, exploiting the intimate relationship between the human psyche and the externally fashioned semblance of reality, engender a primarily non-discursive and psychological experience of the nation. The "belief" in the predestination to the national present is mirrored in the fateful subjection of individuals to the mythical violence of the nation-state, which emerges with the supplanting of the mediated sovereignty of the Ancien Regime by the unmediated sovereign politics of the nation. I examined the latter modality through the paradigmatic example of the French "Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen", which provides a glimpse into the originary moment of modern sovereignty, namely, the inscription of naked life in the foundation of national juridical order. This moment of inscription involves a process of double subjectification, in which the naked life of man is endowed with a political subjectivity by suturing it with the legal persona of the citizen, and it is simultaneously subjected to the sovereign politics and the mythical violence of the nation-state. I illustrated the

structural connection between the imagined community of the nation and the political subjectivity of citizenship through the historical cases of the "national question" that arose in the 1870s and the laws of "denaturalization" that were formulated during and after the First World War. Through this connection, it is possible to see that the "imagined" aspect of the nation has very material consequences, for it is the national imaginary that draws the lines that separate lives that can be inscribed in the national juridical order and endowed with the political existence of the citizen from lives that are "unworthy" of citizenship and find themselves reduced to the status of refugees lacking any political and civil status and facing the unmediated, mythical violence of the nation-state.

It has become fashionable in both academic and popular analysis to declare the decline if not the end of the nation-state as a form of political organization and the weakening of the position of the nation as a dominant form of community. In view of the preceding discussion, the truth of this argument is more historical than ontological and the idea that the nation has *irreversibly* passed away can be understood to derive from two theoretical misconceptions. The first of these consists in conceiving of the nation, along with its parochialism, xenophobia, forced homogenization, and military aggression, as *destined* to give way to the more open, liberal and democratic global society that is supposedly emerging today. This strand of thought shares the mythical assumption of the nationalist ideology, in that it conceives of the present as the terminal point of the culmination of human history, in which the decline of the nation-state appears as an

inevitable stage.¹¹ Thus the past is co-opted into the present which again appears as the crystal of the future.

The second misconception about the demise of the nation consists in failing to appreciate its aesthetico-political foundations, a problem I noted at the beginning of this thesis. Accounting for the rise of the nation and the nation-state mainly in terms of such “hard” institutions as the national economy, rational bureaucracy and state-governed national symbolism leads to the conclusion that the nation-state is in decline as long as one focuses solely on the growing interdependence between the national and global economies, the progressive transfer of state-bureaucratic functions to non-state governmental bodies, and the role of the new media in forging local and global identities. What this line of thought overlooks is that many of the subjective conditions and aesthetic operations that made the imagined community of the nation possible are still in place. In late modern (or “postmodern”) late capitalist Western societies, the process of subjective fragmentation and the increasing indecipherability of the world set in motion by 19th Century modernity have not subsided but rather accelerated. Never have the perceptual fields and their psychic influences in which human beings find themselves been so powerful, dynamic, and rhizomatic than in the “global cities” of today; never have signs been so uprooted, free-floating, and amenable for deployment in aesthetic creations that push the boundaries of the imagination than in the proliferating digital technologies; never have individuals been so fragmented and trivialized than when they encounter not a city, and not even a nation, but a “global society” of monstrous proportions and wielding enormous forces.

¹¹ Francis Fukuyama’s (1992) claims about the “end of history” become intelligible when situated in this mythical understanding.

In such a context, the spectacle and phantasmagoria continue to cater to an insatiable demand for new auratic semblances of reality by employing a vast arsenal ranging from films and computer games to advertisements and prepackaged lifestyles. Moreover, the spectacle today does not have to restrict itself to such public spaces as movie theaters, department stores, or museums, but floods the private domain through television and the internet. In doing so, its effects are not diminished but multiplied. As an architecture of power, the spectacle now distributes bodies before television sets and computer screens. It no longer needs to bring individuals into museums or rally grounds; instead, it turns the very living rooms and offices of individuals into museums and rally grounds. Political struggles are now waged as image wars, not only in party politics and presidential elections but, for example, in the resurgence of neo-fascism. The idea of the "Fortress Europe" as well as neo-fascist movements and renascent xenophobia in Europe and in North America against immigrants from the Third World derive their power from their capacity to manipulate collective imaginaries through media campaigns. Today, all politics is aesthetic and the "image-phantasmagoria of mass culture" is the ground from which fascism again pushes forth (Buck-Morss, 1992: 41).

The political heritage of the imagined community of the nation still haunts us today in yet another domain: the politicization of life. It is true that positing naked life as the ultimate value in politics is not restricted to the nation-state but is characteristic of modern politics in general. However, it is with the national body politic that the juridical inscription of naked life is historically actualized. The refugee, which for Agamben constitutes a liminal figure in modern politics and thus reveals its fundamental mode of operation, is a product of the sovereign politics of the nation. Insofar as the former is with

us today it testifies to the presence of the latter. By inscribing naked life into the juridical order, the nation-state devises a potent political means for bringing life in its entirety under the domination of sovereign politics. However, insofar as the equation of birth=nation breaks down, a new political paradigm is introduced that serves to exhaust the remainder of life that cannot be endowed with political existence. This new paradigm that constitutes the *nomos* of modern politics is the “camp”, which neither starts nor ends with the Third Reich (Agamben, 2000C: 45). If one wants to understand today the status of refugees and “detainees” interned in such shadowy places as refugee camps and army bases over which only the mythical violence of martial law rules, one has to make recourse to the imagined community of the nation. For these bodies that lack any political and legal status, and can thus be killed without being sentenced to death and without committing homicide, have their origins in the moment of the “fall from the nation”, or in other words, in not being worthy of being imagined as a part of a national community. Hence the nation as imagined community, as the grounds on which aesthetics and politics, naked life and sovereignty, biopolitics and thanatopolitics converge, provides the historical template that continues to cast its shadow on contemporary politics, even when the scale and discourse of the new imagined communities (such as the European Union) take on new forms.

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