

12 March 2008



Chaque époque rêve la suivante

Adeola Enigbokan

It is in last night's dream images—today's wish images—that the coming age reveals itself; for Benjamin, construction is the seat of these dreams—it is the unconscious.

*Corresponding in the collective unconscious to the forms of new means of production are images in which the new is intermingled with the old. These images are **wishful fantasies** and in them the collective seeks both to preserve and to transfigure the inchoateness of the social product and the deficiencies in the social system of production.*

Benjamin evokes a Paris filled, not simply with buildings, but with floating Jungian archetypes, dream images, wishful fantasies, contained (not so neatly) within the facades of iron towers, or the orientalist interiors of private persons. These wish-images, like archetypes, riding the machinic waves of new modes of capitalist (re)production, “direct the visual imagination, which has been activated by the new, back to the primeval past.” Dreaming in 19th century Paris then, is the (selective) construction of the past-into-present, the building of a city of shiny, brand new ruins.

* All images taken from *Demonlover* (2002), dir. Olivier Assayas



Architecture makes a start as constructional engineering of the city of bourgeois ruins. This new construction is not simply the raising of buildings made secure by the iron revolution. Most importantly, new construction is the making of fantasy images. *The reproduction of nature in photography soon follows.* Fantasy images reach beyond visual appearance—into the construction of experience. The transformation of architecture into the construction of phantasmagoria, or flows of fantasy, is evidenced in the glass arcades, exhibitions and panoramas that begin to infuse urban experience. Interiors, private rooms of the bourgeoisie, are also spaces of illusion. As the arcades become commodity-cities-within-the-city, the urban environment becomes landscape, experienced as a private room, an interior. The citizen is now commodity-as-flâneur. *In other words, in spite of appearances, and whether by accident or design, building housing estates, too, serves in the long run, the interests of the capitalist state, but—and this is the point I want to emphasize—at a level that is not immediately perceptible. The example is a lesson in visual culture.*



It shows that something has happened to images. For Abbas, as for Benjamin in Paris, construction tells the tale of what has happened to images in post-

Fordist, postmodern, postcolonial Hong Kong. But this tale is never straightforward. It can only be caught in the sidelong glance, a lucid flash in the tactile distraction of movement in the city. History in Hong Kong hides in plain sight, in the “mundane migrations—small dislocations associated with shifts in experience that are not only not traumatic, but often not even noticeable.” Benjamin notes the ambiguity of images as characteristic of modernity. Modernity is always quoting primeval history, jumping over the recent past, reaching into an imagined (pre)-history precisely because of the “ambiguity attending social relationships and products of this epoch.” The result, for both Abbas and Benjamin, is the dream image that hides history in plain sight. *The rule seems to be that the more complex the space, the more simplistic the image used to represent it will be. In other words, in confusion, the reach for cliché.* Abbas notes the homogenization of space, that occurs when “old and new, modern and traditional” are drawn into an affective program for desire, leading those who traverse the city to accept “the most blatant discontinuities as continuities.” This spatial programming, or anamorphosis, introduces a sense of distortion into the architectural façade of the city.



Architecture and cinema share a common problematic: how time enters to complicate the grid of stable forms and image. Demonlover, a discontinuous fable of corporate espionage, is shot almost entirely in the sorts of interiors that characterize business worlds. Impeccable offices, with neutral-colored walls, airplane bathrooms, flickering computer screens, hotel rooms and

expensive Japanese restaurants, the backseats of taxis; it is never entirely clear when we have left one city and arrived in another. We are always in motion, from interior to interior. Time appears to be of the essence—there are important phone calls to be made across distant time zones and scheduled appointments with the masseuse. Mostly, though, characters wait, killing time, never anywhere long enough to adjust to any particular pace. City-space appears only as a conduit, or passage-way, seen as reflected through glass by the travelers. There is only one scene in which we see a character in her ‘home’—which is ironic, since she is a spy, working under an assumed identity. We see a sparse Paris apartment, much different from the opulent ornamented bourgeois interiors of the 19th century. She is present, but leaves no trace. It would be easy for her to disappear.

