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# Because the night

## An archaeology of the image of modern phantasmagoria

**Stefano Tornieri**  
**Roberto Zancan**

*The night does not show things, it suggests them. It disturbs and surprises us with its strangeness. It liberates forces within us which are dominated by our reason during the daytime.*  
*Brassai. Paris de Nuit, 1933*

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### **Shock Me All Night Long: trans-illumination**

The invention of industrial artificial lighting marked a turning point in the way buildings and streets were perceived and represented, as the bright lights of the modern metropolis were able to dispel the fear of darkness and the unknown. However, at the same time, the night-time city also became associated with the ideas and feelings of spectrality, as the new artificial lights illuminated the previously dark and opaque constructions, creating a sense of unease and uncertainty. The use of artificial lighting for architectural design developed simultaneously, albeit in different ways, in both America and Europe with the rise of electric lighting at the end of the 19th century.<sup>1</sup> On one hand, in big metropolises, such as Chicago or New York, it is mostly the design of skyscrapers that attracted the attention of architects and engineers. Floodlighting and coloured external lights were used to create a new monumentality and celebrate the supremacy of the skyscraper as a national emblem.

Harvey Wiley Corbett, a leading figure in the design of early 20th century skyscrapers, believed that the illuminated portion of the building should not be an afterthought, but rather an integral part of the overall design. In continuity with the other changes that had led to the creation of this type of building, such as the elimination of the cornice, he argued that: “the form of the illuminated portion should be so tied in with the rest of the building that it should appear as a jewel in a setting, forming a coherent part of the entire structure.”<sup>2</sup>

Since European cities were characterized by the prevalence of old buildings and had almost no skyscrapers, lighting from within the building dominated the use of light design.<sup>3</sup> While there were similarities in the use of artificial lighting between the two continents, their differences are evident, as vigorously expressed by the European polemics against the ‘inelegant’ use of floodlighting, defined

1 For a description of the transformations caused by the advent of artificial lighting in the urban space, see for example Tim Enders (2017) *From Light to Dark. Daylight, Illumination, and Gloom*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

2 Harvey Wiley Corbett (1930) *Architecture of the Night*, *Bulletin of the General Electric Company*, special issue, February, pp. 58–59.

3 Dietrich Neumann (2006) *Lichtreklame / Luminous Advertising*, in: Marion Ackermann and Dietrich Neumann (Eds) *Leuchtende Bauten: Architektur der Nacht / Luminous Buildings. Architecture of the Night*, pp. 80–81. Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz Verlag.

by Gio Ponti as “primitive and barbaric”.<sup>4</sup> An attempt to apply the European approach in the USA was the Seagram Building (New York), that significantly updates the technique of transillumination (e.g. illumination from within), a technique that prompted Ada Louise Huxtable to famously argue that “the whole, viewed from the outside, is no longer architectural in the traditional sense: it is a design, not of substance, but of colour, light and motion.”<sup>5</sup>

This remark is useful to understand the nocturnal, dematerialization effect the building underwent. At night, architectural volumes have less defined contours, lights and shadows distort the perception of the elements, blurring the forms, rendering consistent what is ephemeral, and immaterial what is solid. Instead of a dark mass looming above the street, the building appears as a sort of mystical screen that reveals what happens inside. The light that shines through its façade and exterior skin unveils its skeleton and the secrets of its internal life, standing out amidst the surrounding darkness. The building, obviously, is not a ghost, yet it shares with the latter many characteristics (transparency, blurred outlines, uncertain animation, etc.).

### **Smells like light spirit: the window display**

In the European predilection for internal lighting, one element plays a crucial role: the window display. Although the pre-modern city was rich in productive and commercial activities on the ground floor, nothing like this element existed. Since ancient times, shops had openings on the street, but these were not functional to the display of commodities, but rather to protecting goods from the unpredictable behaviour of customers.<sup>6</sup> Where the interiors were visible, this had the purpose of showing the activities taking place inside (e.g. weighing, measuring, etc.). Under these circumstances, the flaneur had no possibility to exist: not only there was no chance to observe anything, but the proverbial curiosity of the flaneur would have easily attracted the suspicious gaze of security guards. For this imaginative and critical pseudo-consumer to exist, not only a global production and circulation of goods was to be put in place, but also an aesthetic of display that allowed for them to be visible and seemingly accessible to all.

The window display is the result of the evolution of glass plate production technologies and the emergence of efficient and cheap lighting technology, that already in mid-XIX century turned shopfronts into shopfronts which presented “an uninterrupted mass of glass from the ceiling to the ground.”<sup>7</sup> This continuous, transparent, sparkling surface was like glass on a framed painting, making the goods display more attractive: “as long as lights were too weak to be used indirectly, that is with the aid of reflectors, they were placed among the goods in the window. When gas and electricity increased the range over which light could be cast, the source of the light itself disappeared from view.”<sup>8</sup>

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4 Gio Ponti (1957) *Amate l'architettura: l'architettura è un cristallo*. Genova: Vitali e Ghianda, pp. 80–81. The Italian architect proposed instead “a new nocturnal city”, whose premises can be seen in his famous Pirelli Tower (Milan), that employs ceiling fluorescent lights in the three vertical sections into which the building is divided, and rooftop floodlights reflecting off the bottom of a cantilevered roof. On this, see also Dietrich Neumann (Ed., 2002), *Architecture of the Night: The Illuminated Building*, Munich/New York: Prestel, pp. 196–97. Another example of this European approach to building lighting is the famous Palazzo di Fuoco of Giulio Minoletti and Giuseppe Chiodi in Piazzale Loreto in Milan. See Palazzo di Fuoco in piazzale Loreto, in *L'architettura. Cronache e storia*, vol. IX, n. 96, October 1963.

5 Ada Louise Huxtable (1954) Banker's showcase, *Arts Digest*, 29, p. 13.

6 The painting *The Shoemaker's Shop*, by Lothar von Seebach (1893–1894) shows, in a very realistic way, what were – still at the end of the XIXth century – the working conditions of a craftsman working behind his window, in daylight.

7 Charles Knight, London, 1851, quoted from Alison Adburgham (1989) *Shops and Shopping, 1800–1914: Where, and in What Manner the Well-Dressed Englishwoman Bought Her Clothes*. London: Barrie & Jenkins, p. 96. See also Wolfgang Schivelbusch (1988) *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

8 Wolfgang Schivelbusch, cit, pp. 146, 148.

The first shop windows were installed in the late 18th century in metropolises such as Paris, London and Berlin, where conspicuous consumption was rising rapidly.<sup>9</sup> The Palais Royal was probably the first modern shopping arcade with modern window displays. In London, Francis Place was one of the first merchants to experiment with window display in Charing Cross. Although Place – a social reformer close to Robert Owen – was condemned by many for corrupting morals by leading a large mass of customers to purchase unnecessary goods, he defended this practice in his memoirs, stating that he “sold more goods from the window ... than the wages of the workers paid and the cleaning costs”.<sup>10</sup>

In *Le Système des objets*, Jean Baudrillard writes: “Whether as packaging, window or partition, glass is the basis of a transparency without transition: we see, but cannot touch. The message is universal and abstract. A shop display is at once magical and frustrating – the strategy of advertising in epitome.”<sup>11</sup>

Window displays are windows facing inwards, exhibitors of what can or cannot be achieved by desires. What appears before the eyes is similar to a ghost: it can be seen, but it cannot be grasped. For most of the population it is as accessible as it is elusive. Through it, the interior of a building is exposed to urban vision, producing an effect of fascination and distancing.

### **Spirits in the material world: Surrealists’ reflections and mirrored images**

While European architects and designers were fascinated by the aesthetic and the power the illuminated glass,<sup>12</sup> the Surrealists were interested in playing with them in order to unveil their hidden functioning.<sup>13</sup> In an article from 1928, entitled *Les spectacles de la rue*, photographer Robert Desnos focused on these “amazing window displays”, “more numerous in Paris than elsewhere”, where “life is reflected unreal [...] with appearances of the dream”.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, photographers close to the avant-garde began to photograph reflections of shop windows, as also one of the manifestos of the new photography exhorted to do.<sup>15</sup> Berenice Abbott, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Florence Henri, Ger-

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9 Christine MacLeod (1987) *Accident or design? George Ravenscroft’s patent and the invention of lead-crystal glass*, *Technology and Culture*, 28(4), pp. 776–803.

10 Patrick Robertson (2011) *Robertson’s Book of Firsts: Who Did What for the First Time*. New York: Bloomsbury, p. 348.

11 Jean Baudrillard (1968) *Le Système des objets: la consommation des signes*. Paris: Gallimard, p. 42. Baudrillard continues “glass works exactly like atmosphere in that it allows nothing but the sign of its content to emerge, in that it interposes itself in its transparency, just as the system of atmosphere does in its abstract consistency, between the materiality of things and materiality of needs.”

12 The extension to the Samaritaine department store in Paris with glass domes, designed by Franz Jourdain around 1907, or the ribbon windows illuminated by over-mounted neon lighting reflected out into the street by white curtains of the Petersdorff Department Store, design by Erich Mendelsohn in Breslau around 1928, are good and well-known examples of how much the emphasis on bright, flat surfaces to simplify illumination, helped to spread the architectural vocabulary of modernism.

13 Due to limited space, the topic of night signs has not been covered in this essay. Instead, the focus has been on the less explored representation of windows at night in surrealist photography. It is worth mentioning, however, the studies on the “electrographic architecture” of Las Vegas, inspired by the renowned pamphlet Thomas K. Wolfe, “Las Vegas (What?), Las Vegas (Can’t hear you! Too noisy), Las Vegas !!!”, *Esquire* 61.2, February 1964, or the words of lighting designer Derek Phillips who criticised this nocturnal signage architecture as deceptive: “There are few disappointments as real as entering some towns after dark and experiencing the sense of scale and vitality given by the facades of neon signs, only to find the following morning one has been in a shanty town of huts at low level, above which large sign frameworks have been erected. The night-time appearance need not be the same, but it should bear sufficient correlation with the day appearance to be appreciated as the same building.” Derek Phillips (1964) *Lighting in Architectural Design*. New York: McGraw Hill, p. 210.

14 Robert Desnos (1928) *Les spectacles de la rue*, *Le Soir*, 11 September.

15 Werner Gräff (1929) *Es kommt der neue Fotograf!* Berlin: H. Reckendorf. Gräff is also the author of the Dadaist animated movie *Ghosts Before Breakfast*.

maine Krull or even Dora Maar, Roland Penrose and others, all created series of diurnal and nocturnal window displays, where reflections are omnipresent: in the 1930s, reflection had become a modern leitmotiv.<sup>16</sup>

The fascination of the avant-gardes for reflections on windows displays, or the recourse to parasitic effects in the field of applied photography, can be attributed to several factors.<sup>17</sup> Reflections particularly intrigued Surrealists because they were considered mistakes in photography textbooks, since disrupting perception, and thus embodying the perceptual disorientation brought about by the experience of the modern city. Reflections appeared as ghostly, absent presences that existed in the urban space at a latent state, always on the verge of materialising, and surprising the passer-by. Consistent with the Surrealists' interest in "random figurations," "petrifying coincidences," and a whole "aesthetic of surprise," windows reflections served as tools of subversion and sensory disruption, masterfully combining the Surrealist poetics of collage, montage, and chance encounter.<sup>18</sup>

As works such as Brassai's *Paris by Night* or Bill Brandt's *A Night in London*<sup>19</sup> began to appear, this inspired many other photographers to publish books entirely dedicated to the nocturnal representation of main European cities nightlife. For the first time the night became a lens through which it was possible to capture the dreamlike quality of urban experience, emphasising the spirits that populate it. In these books, buildings, objects, people, and the urban fabric at large, assume a ghostlike quality. Emerging from the darkness, the interiors and exteriors of stores and houses seem mysterious, strange, uncanny, potentially harbouring unacceptable, dissolute, or criminal behaviours.

## End of the night : conclusion

In ancient Greek the word *phàntasma* - (*phàntasma*- φάντασμα, φαντάζω (*phantàzo*, "show"; from the root *φαν-*, which expresses the idea of "appearing" and "showing" - indicated the apparition. In a world that presupposed the widespread presence of souls, it seems that for the Greeks it was the event, rather than the subject, that connoted the manifestation of the supernatural. The ancient Greek expression has the advantage of immediately highlighting the fact that a ghost is something that always questions the image and its correspondence to reality, what is true and what is not.

Under the gaze of surrealist photographers, simultaneously critical of and fascinated by what they saw, the night 'reveals' its intense life made of prostitution and crime, fun and entertainment, as well as a bustling site where the preparatory activities for the day to come take place. Under the night-light, one thing emerges: modern life, indoor and outdoor, never stops. These nocturnal representations of public and domestic life, surfaced at the encounter of artificial lights and reflections on shop windows, show the extent to which modern European cities were becoming an aesthetic battlefield populated by the spectral forms of urban consumerism, and a modern urban experience as shaped by this "visible unattainability" of things and environments.

A sense of disorientation and ambiguity was thus produced, calling into question the reliability and essence of reality itself, and somehow undermining the sense of certainty and stability that was associated with the modern metropolis. An urban phantasmagoria made of bright lights and surreal images became a manifestation of the power of the ghostly, a reminder that the seemingly solid and

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<sup>16</sup> Without overlooking Eugène Atget, who was rediscovered by Man Ray and Berenice Abbott at the end of the 1920s. Eugène Atget and Pierre Mac-Orlan (1930) *Atget: Photographe de Paris*. New York: E. Weythe.

<sup>17</sup> Huda Othman (2022) The Surreal creativity in windows display design, *Journal of Design Sciences and Applied Arts*, 3(1), pp. 35-49.

<sup>18</sup> Ian Walker (2002) *City Gorged with Dreams: Surrealism and Documentary Photography in Interwar Paris*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

<sup>19</sup> Brassai (1933) *Paris de Nuit*. Paris: Arts et Métiers Graphiques; Bill Brandt (1938) *A Night in London. Story of a London night in Sixty-Four Photographs*. London: Country Life.

dependable structures of the world were, in fact, fragile and transitory, thereby offering a counter-point to the proverbial disenchantment of Western modernity vis-à-vis ghostly matters.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Libero Andreotti and Lahijji Nadir (2017) *The Architecture of Phantasmagoria: Specters of the City*. New York: Routledge.  
Steve Pile (2005) *Real Cities: Modernity, Space and the Phantasmagorias of City Life*. London: Sage

