

BENJAMIN AND STRINDBERG:

MYSTICAL CONSTELLATIONS

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On a sunny day in June, we finally discovered the *Birger Jarls Passage* in the city centre of Stockholm. It is hidden between *Smålandsgatan* and *Birger Jarlsgatan*, where the rich people can do their shopping and the not so rich can have a look at the spécialités like flaneurs. This arcade was built in 1894–97 and was renovated in 2004. Now it looks at us with the dignified, old-fashioned, stylish glance, the same way *Passage Vivienne* or *Passage des Panoramas* in Paris do. The look, the glimpse, the question: What might have happened inside me? Yes, what might have happened inside you? [R2a,3].

When we enter, it is empty. If you look into a shop, you can see the calicots, the cashiers. But the long hall lies there like a passage into something unknown, a winding road. It gives you the impression of another world, in sharp contrast to the clear blue sky outside.

What did August Strindberg see here in this passage when it was new, when he had an exhibition of his paintings here, but sold nothing?

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We take photographs of ourselves in the passage, all alone.

PARIS, APRIL TO OCTOBER 1927

From April to October 1927 Walter Benjamin visited his friend Franz Hessel in Paris. Together they began work on an essay on the arcades. Benjamin continued to write on his own. In January, he writes that he will be able to finish the essay in some weeks, in March, and claims

¹ In *Arcade Materials*, (Sam Dolbear & Hannah Proctor, eds.), Vol. 3: *Arcades Blue: Threshold to Cosmos*, London: Aldgate Press 2018.

that the text probably will be longer than a short essay. For the rest of the year and until his death in September 1940 he works intensively on what will become *The Arcades Project*.

What is not so well known is the role that the Swedish author, the dramatist and photographer August Strindberg (1849-1912) had already played at the early stage of Benjamin's work. Both Hessel and Benjamin mention and quote Strindberg in their first drafts in 1927–1928. They both quote from one of Strindberg's fairy tales, in which an arcade plays an important role.

'THE PILOT'S TRIALS'

Strindberg's *Sagor (Fairy Tales)* from 1903 contains thirteen stories, each with a structure loosely resembling that of a fairy tale. They were criticised for being too surrealistic, trespassing even the fairy tale's fantastic borders.

In one of them, 'The Pilot's Trials' (*Lotsens vedermödor*), the pilot Viktor, a brave young man, is called out in a storm to save a brig from the waves. But when he boards the ship he finds it abandoned. He is adrift in the open sea, and when he goes further into the brig to search for a light, he suddenly finds himself in a long hall with a blue-and-white carpet. This leads him into a passage. At the threshold, he encounters a slot machine with scales, where he weighs only ten percent of his normal weight. From this machine, he receives a letter that he reads three times.

In Germany, such machines were sometimes called a *Kobold* (goblin). Benjamin writes about these guards of the threshold, who protect and mark the transitions:

At the entrance to the arcade, to the skating rink, to the pub, to the tennis court: penates. The hen that lays the golden praline-eggs, the machine that stamps our names on nameplates and the other machine that weighs us (the modern gnothi seauton), slot machines, the mechanical fortuneteller – these guard the threshold.

[C3,4]

Benjamin underlines the "threshold magic" and, "above all, weighing devices". [I1a,4]

Having been weighed, the pilot passes the threshold into the arcade and looks around. There are all sorts of shops in the passage, but no customers in any of them. He enters a shop that sells seashells and corals. (Strindberg himself had a collection of shells on his writing table

in *Drottningagatan 88*, which he had bought from Zeinow's store in *Birger Jarls Passage*.) The pilot sits down to think about life in the sea.

A book on the counter has a verse by Coleridge as motto. He reads it and blushes. Why?

He walks through the shop and into the backroom. Suddenly he is in a landscape where he meets a goblin asking: "And you aren't afraid either?" "A sailor mustn't be, or no girl will be found of him". Viktor walks on – into a new shop, a new backroom and meets a poisoner – she opens a door to a forest. He fights with a bull. He believes to see his fiancée, but it is a *fata morgana*, and she changes form.

Afterwards, he comes to a cottage, where he meets an old woman and asks for a place to stay overnight. He brings with him a snake, which he wears like a tie. It protects him. The old woman, who is obviously a witch, and who the next morning expected to see him dead, is astonished, saying; she could see that you have received my letter and understood it. This was the letter from the slot machine, and it said: "*Mann muss sich nie verblüffen lassen*" – translated of Strindberg into Swedish as "*lyckan star den djärve bi*" (fortune favours the brave).

Then, towards the end, a little girl, Anne-Marie (also the name of Strindberg's own daughter) asks her mother, who happens to be the storyteller: "But how could the pilot go from the ship to the passage; and didn't he go back again afterwards, or had he only dreamt it all?" She then also asks about the verses in the book.

The mother answers: "Oh, yes, the ones in the shell shop [...] Yes, I've forgotten them, but you mustn't ask questions like that; you see, it's only a fairy-story, dear".

BENJAMIN, HESSEL, STRINDBERG

In *Convolute C*, Benjamin quotes from a manuscript by Hessel:

It is the obscurely rising dream of northerly streets in a big city – not only Paris, perhaps, but also Berlin and the largely unknown London – obscurely rising, in a rainless twilight that is nonetheless damp. The streets grow narrow and the houses right and left draw closer together; ultimately it becomes an arcade with grimy shop windows, a gallery of glass. To the right and left: Are those dirty bistros, with waitresses lurking in black-and-white silk blouses? It stinks of cheap wine. Or is it the

garish vestibule of a bordello? As I advance a little further, however, I see on both sides small summer-green doors and the rustic window shutters they call volets. Sitting there, little old ladies are spinning, and through the windows by the somewhat rigid flowering plant, as though in a country garden, I see a fair-skinned young lady in a gracious apartment, and she sings: "Someone is spinning silk..." [C2a,5]

Benjamin's comment is: "Franz Hessel, manuscript. Compare Strindberg, 'The Pilot's Trials'". Hessel's manuscript sketches a surrealistic scenario of a city landscape transforming through a moribund arcade into a summer-green country garden with half-real, fairy-tale-like women. He seems to paraphrase parts of 'The Pilot's Trials'. Benjamin refers to the German translation, *Die Drangsale des Lotsen*, in Strindberg's *Märchen* from 1917. In Convolute H, Benjamin himself retells parts of the story with the focus on "extinct nature: the shell shop in the arcades":

In 'The Pilot's Trials,' Strindberg tells of an "arcade with brightly lit shops". "Then he went on into the arcade. . . . There was every possible kind of shop, but not a soul to be seen, either behind or before the counters. After a while he stopped in front of a big window in which there was a whole display of shells. As the door was open, he went in. From floor to ceiling there were rows of shells of every kind, collected from all the seas of the world. No one was in, but there was a ring of tobacco smoke in the air... So he began his walk again, following the blue and white carpet. The passage wasn't straight but winding, so that you could never see the end of it; and there were always fresh shops there, but no people; and the shopkeepers were not to be seen." The unfathomability of the moribund arcades is a characteristic motif. Strindberg, *Märchen* (Munich and Berlin, 1917), pp. 52-53, 59. [H1a,3]

Hessel focused on the dreamlike commodity world of the arcade, while Benjamin foregrounds the motif of the moribund arcades, as in Émile Zola's novel *Therèse Raquin* (1867), in which he describes a shop in the *Passage du Pont Neuf*. Benjamin quotes the part of Strindberg's fairy tale that describes the shell shop. Shells are extinct nature containing traces of the life once lived inside them. In Strindberg's story the empty arcade without human beings is like an empty shell, extinct nature. The 'dying' arcades, like dying nature, is one of Benjamin's

motifs, especially during the first years of his work on Paris as the capital of the nineteenth century. According to Theodor W. Adorno Benjamin had

as no one else, the ability to regard historical things, manifestations of the objectified spirit, 'culture' as if they were nature [...] His entire thought could be characterized as 'natural-historical'. The petrified, frozen, or obsolete inventory of cultural fragments spoke to him [...] as fossils or plants in the herbarium to the collector.¹

Susan Buck-Morss has the following comment: "Natural history as ur-history meant bourgeois prehistory as prehistoric. This was a central image in the *Passagen-Werk*".²

In Benjamin's reading, this seems to have been a central, dialectical image also in Strindberg's story.

UNDERWATER WORLDS

In Strindberg's fairy tale, the pilot stops before the window of Zeinow's store. He gazes at the shells and corals collected from oceans all over the world, and suddenly he is lost in dreams as though in a conch. The shop's showcase seems underwater.

This has parallels with Louis Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris*, from 1926. The first part of this book deals with the *Passage de l'Opéra* in Paris. In this arcade, the storyteller experiences something strange. He stares into a shop's display window with walking sticks in a glaucous gleam, seemingly filtered through deep water – and at the same time he hears a sudden noise: "I recognised the noise, it was the sound of the conch, that never stops fascinating authors and film actors. The whole ocean in the *Passage de l'Opéra*."³ The walking sticks drift like seaweed in the sea, and then he catches sight of a mermaid. It is a surreal scene. The next day, he again walks into the arcade, but now the display window shows nothing of the kind, except a tiny rest of the mermaid.

We do not know if Aragon had read Strindberg, but Benjamin had read them both. The parallels between Strindberg's and Aragon's arcade stories are clear. "Surrealism was born in an arcade", Benjamin wrote [C1,2]. In Stockholm's *Birger Jarls Passage* in Strindberg's 'The Pilot's Trials'? Strindberg anticipates a surrealist aesthetic and Aragon's *Paris peasant*, not only because he uses dream images as an artistic device, but because he at the same time creates a reality as a floating condition between dreaming and awakening.

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Walking through the passage, the pilot notices the tiny square-patterned carpet in blue and white. It is leading into the unknown, the road makes a curve impossible to foresee: “It was uncanny, certainly, but at the same time it was fun, for there was novelty in it”.⁴

What is this ‘novelty’? May it be the arcade, or the warehouse, the phantasmagoria of the commodity? This underwater world, this world drenched in magic and fairy tales – is it a world that takes one away from the reality one knows, and that can swallow one?

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Friedrich Gerstäcker (1816-1872) is cited several times in *The Arcades project*. Gerstäcker was a maritime explorer and author of many novels and travel diaries. His *Die Versunkene Stadt* (1853) is especially relevant here. In it, he describes the underwater world of the city as a world where perception is made difficult, colours look different, and things take on new shapes, seeming to grow and enter in to new and unknown constellations. Seaweed, growing cancerous forms, proliferates in shape. Things move slowly, seem unclear – somehow shady, a half-world (*‘demi-monde’*). Aragon writes about this *lueur glauque* (glaucous gleam) under the skirts in the arcades.

Benjamin also often describes the arcades as an underwater world, reflecting their dreamlike quality, but also their appearance as something outdated, overgrown, and forgotten: something subconscious.

Benjamin even cites Léo Claretie with a reference to Gerstäcker. Claretie describes an undersea jeweller's shop:

We came into the underwater hall of the jewellers. Never would one have believed it possible to be so far removed from terra firma. An immense dome . . . overspread the entire marketplace, which was filled with the brilliant glow of electricity and the happy buzz of crowds, and an assortment of shops with glittering display windows. [L4,2]

Benjamin's comment: "It is significant that this image resurfaces just when the beginning of the end has arrived for the arcades". [L4,2]

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In 'The Pilot's Trials' the pilot is moving down under from the sea surface to the seabed, as the Swedish literary critic Ulf Olsson observes in his essay «*Snäckarnas sagor*», ('The Shells Tales').⁵ The seashells, these beautiful, non-functional objects that the pilot encounters in the shell shop, are singing their own praise, a siren's song that draws us into this magic, enticing world of the commodity. The commodities seem to have a life of their own, and when they are old and outdated they look like fossils, like the shells in the ocean: the ocean is the prehistoric origin. The new is the ur-old and ever the same: oceans, forests, nature – and cities, not only as underwater worlds, but also as forests. Benjamin points to a parallel between Gerstäcker and Hugo:

An astonishing chapter of *Les Misérables* contains the following lines: "What had just taken place in this street would not have surprised a forest. The trees, the copse, the heath, the branches roughly intertangled, the tall grass, have a darkly mysterious existence. This wild multitude sees there sudden apparitions of the invisible; there, what is below man distinguishes through the dark what is above man." Gabriel Bounoure: 'Abimes de Victor Hugo', *Mesures* (July 15, 1936), p.49 [Gerstäcker passage] [M15,4]

Gerstäcker, Strindberg, Aragon, Hessel and Benjamin; they present arcades and cities as underwater worlds, as a mysterious experience, half real, half unreal, with – as Hugo puts it – sudden apparitions of the invisible.

HELL. SWEDENBORG

The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are 'status quo' is the catastrophe. It is not an ever-present possibility but what in each case is given. Thus Strindberg in *To Damascus?*: Hell is not something that awaits us,

but this life here and now. [N9a,1]

Benjamin puts a question mark after the title *To Damascus*, and in fact it was not in *To Damascus* (1898-1904) that Strindberg developed this theme, but in *A Dream Play* (1901). In *A Dream Play* Strindberg sees hell as life here and now, as does Benjamin:

The 'modern,' the time of hell. The punishments of hell are always the newest thing going in this domain. What is at issue is not that 'the same thing happens over and over,' and even less would it be a question here of eternal return. It is rather that precisely in that which is newest the face of the world never alters, that this newest remains, in every respect, the same. – This constitutes the eternity of hell. To determine the totality of traits by which the 'modern' is defined would be to represent hell. [S1,5]

Hell is always the newest. This 'always newest' is at the same time the 'always the same' (*das Immerwiedergleiche*). In Strindberg's dream-play, people are forced to constantly repeat stupid actions as if they were something new: the old mathematician has for ever to do the homework he did when he went to school and did not know mathematics, and so forth. The new is always the old and the same. In his prose text *Inferno* (1896-97), written in Paris, Strindberg develops this theme in a way that clearly shows another parallel to Benjamin, their common interest in the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772).

Strindberg begins to read Swedenborg in Paris. According to *Inferno*, he is first introduced to Swedenborg, «the Buddha of the North» through Balzac's novel *Seraphita* (1834). In this novel, Balzac takes us to the fjords of Norway, namely "Strom-fjord, midway between Trondhjem and Christiansand". This book, dedicated to Madame Evelina de Hanska (whom Balzac would later marry) is full of mystery and Swedenborgian theology. In the novel, a friend of Swedenborg lives in a 'Swedish castle' in the Norwegian mountains by the fjord, and his child, the character Seraphita/Seraphitus, is an angel-like creature, both woman and man.

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Strangely enough we, the authors of this article, are living by a fjord now, almost like the fjord in Balzac's novel, midway between Trondheim and Kristiansand, looking up to the mountains similar to those mentioned by Balzac – and sitting here now, writing this, we have just discovered this correspondence between Swedenborg, Balzac and Strindberg.

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Strindberg calls Swedenborg 'the Deliverer'. "A single word suffices to illuminate my soul [...]: 'Devastatio'. All my sufferings I find described by Swedenborg». ⁶ "Swedenborg describes Hell as follows", Strindberg writes: "The damned soul inhabits a splendid palace, leads a luxurious life there, and regards himself as one of the elect". And then, "gradually the splendours disappear, and the wretched soul finds that it is confined in a wretched hovel and surrounded by filth". ⁷

Strindberg's conclusion follows some pages later: "I, a child of the renowned nineteenth century, am firmly convinced that there is a hell – a hell, however, on earth, and that I have just come out of it". ⁸

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Benjamin refers to Swedenborg seven times in *The Arcades project*, in different connections. He mentions Swedenborg in connection with Charles Fourier [U12,7], [W1a], (Fourier's theories of the phalansteries, his cosmic visions) and he comments on the unified impact of Fourier and Swedenborg: "In England, the influence of Fourier combined with that of Swedenborg" [W3a,5]. Furthermore, Benjamin points to a connection between Blanqui and Swedenborg [J36,5], but without discussing the possible influence of Swedenborg's *Arcana Caelestia* (*Heavenly Mysteries*, 1749–1756) on Blanqui's cosmology in *L'éternité par les astres* (1872).

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Swedenborg developed a theory of correspondences between the human spirit and the cosmic universe. Even André Breton mentions Swedenborg in his own manifesto on

surrealism, 1924, when he writes about ‘the alchemy of the word’ and defines the ‘*supernaturalistic dream-state*’ of the new surrealist poetry: “They [the poems] are hardly any more obscure than Hegel’s metaphysics or Swedenborg’s *Memorabilia*, and would lose their charm if they were explained, if such were possible”.⁹ Moreover, Swedenborg described his dreams when he developed his theory of correspondences, and *Memorabilia; Or, Spiritual diary from the year 1747-1765* is one of the mystical, ‘surrealistic’ texts.

There are obvious links between Swedenborg, Baudelaire, Strindberg, surrealism and Benjamin. Benjamin refers to Swedenborg three times in *Convolute J* [Baudelaire], in connection with the theories of correspondences and of mysticism and Satanism: “For the experience of the *correspondances*, Baudelaire refers occasionally to Swedenborg” [J12a,5], and:

In an important passage by de Maistre, we not only encounter allegory in its satanic provenance, and in the very perspective that would later be that of Baudelaire; we also discover – here invested with the mysticism of Saint-Martin or Swedenborg – the *correspondances*. And these latter constitute, revealingly, the antidote to allegory. [J86,2]

HISTORY: A DREAM PLAY

In the prologue to Strindberg’s *A Dream Play*, we read:

Anything may happen; everything is possible and probable. Time and space do not exist. On an insignificant background of reality, imagination designs and embroiders novel patterns: a medley of memories, experiences, free fancies, absurdities and improvisations. – The characters split, double, multiply, vanish, solidify, blur, clarify. But one consciousness reigns above them all – that of the dreamer: and before it there are no secrets, no incongruities, no scruples, no laws.¹⁰

When Strindberg develops his new technique of writing with its dreamlike alogical logic, he builds on Swedenborg’s books of dreams, but also on Baudelaire’s symbolism. Also in *To Damascus* (1898) there are dreamlike scenes – if Benjamin had only read that piece, he would

have known Strindberg's surrealistic way of writing. However, the lines he refers to in [N9a,1] are taken from *A Dream Play*. Thus, he must have read both plays.

Benjamin develops Strindberg's two motifs, modern life as hell and as a dream, in an extraordinary new direction. Benjamin considers the past as a dream:

The new, dialectical method of doing history presents itself as the art of experiencing the present as waking world, a world to which that dream we name the past refers in truth. To pass through and carry out *what has been* in remembering the dream! – therefore: remembering and awakening are most intimately related. Awakening is namely the dialectical, Copernican turn of remembrance. [K1,3]

The task of the historian is to be the interpreter of dreams. In the dialectical image, what has been within a particular epoch is manifest only as a “particular dream image as such”, and it is “at this moment that the historian takes up, with regard to that image, the task of dream interpretation”. [N4,1] The relation between dream and awakening is the canon of dialectics: “The realization of dream elements in the course of waking up is the canon of dialectics. It is paradigmatic for the thinker and binding for the historian”. [N4,4]

History as a dream is, at the same time, history as the dream world of commodities. “Capitalism was a natural phenomenon with which a new dream-filled sleep came over Europe, and, through it, a reactivation of mythic forces”. [K1a,8] Benjamin's motto for convolute N ‘On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress’ is this quote from Marx's *Der historische Materialismus*: “The reform of consciousness consists *solely* in [...] the awakening of the world from its dream about itself”.

The awakening from the world of commodities, from the phantasmagories of capitalism, from the world of dreams in the arcades, is also the way in which Strindberg's story ends in ‘The Pilot's Trials’. It concludes: “it is only a fairy tale”. Here, we cannot but repeat that during Benjamin's work with *The Arcades project* in the years 1927–35, his title for the work in progress was ‘The Paris Arcades: a dialectical fairy tale’.

BEHIND THE SIGNS

The first paragraph of [S9,2] reads:

It may be supposed that in the typical *Jugendstil* line – conjoined in fantastic montage – nerve and electric wire not infrequently meet (and that the vegetal nervous system in particular operates, as a limiting form, to mediate between the world of organism and the world of technology).

In the paragraph after that, Benjamin quotes Dolf Sternberger's *Panorama* (Hamburg, 1938, p. 33):

'The fin-de-siècle cult of the nerves ... maintains this telegraphic image of exchange. It was said of Strindberg by his second wife, Frida, ... that his nerves had become so sensitive to atmospheric electricity that an approaching thunderstorm would send its signal over them as if over electrical wires'.

Benjamin and Strindberg both had great interest in relations between new technologies and the human body and brain. Strindberg is famous as a playwright and an author. However, he was also a painter and photographer. We do not know if Benjamin had any knowledge of Strindberg's preoccupation with photography. But the parallel between the two is again striking. As a photographer he was a pioneer. He took his first shots around 1860, only few years after Nadar, who began photographing in 1853. Strindberg experimented with portraits and self-portraits, and he also photographed himself in different social roles such as a poet, a hunter, and a clerk.

What do the photographs show us? Strindberg experimented with exposure time of up to 300 seconds. If he looked long enough into the camera lens, maybe his soul would appear in the photo? (His aura?!) A photograph could uncover hidden aspects of material reality; through enlargement, hidden structures in small objects were laid bare. So why not the human soul, spirit and consciousness? Strindberg, the mystic, the spiritist, the materialist, hoped to reveal the hidden structures of both material and spiritual reality. Without a camera or lens, he took shots of the starry sky – he called the technique *celestografi* – '*celestography*'. He commented on his self-portraits in the following way: "I do not care about how I look, but I have the hope that other people are capable of seeing my soul, and these photos are showing my soul much better than many other photos".¹¹

When we look at a photograph, we see more than what we see, because we read the picture and add something to our perception of the photographed object. Siegfried Kracauer wrote about this in his essay on photography in 1927:

A shudder runs through the viewer of old photographs. For they make visible not the knowledge of the original but the spatial configuration of a moment; what appears in the photograph is not the person but the sum of what can be subtracted from him or her.¹²

In his 'Small History of Photography' (1931), Benjamin further developed this view, using a new concept, the optical unconscious:

One learns of this optical unconscious only through photography, just as the instinctual unconscious is discovered in psychoanalysis. [...] But at the same time, photography discloses in this material physiognomic aspects, image worlds, which inhabit the smallest things, interpretable and latent enough to have found a bolthole in daydreams. But now, as they have become enlarged and articulable they make manifest how the difference between technology and magic is a thoroughly historical variable.¹³

In the second version of 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility' (1936), Benjamin compares the two forms of the unconscious, the optical unconscious and the instinctual unconscious:

[...] these two types of unconscious are linked. For in most cases the diverse aspects of reality captured by the film camera lie outside only the normal spectrum of sense impressions. Many of the deformations and stereotypes, transformations and catastrophes which can assail the optical world in films afflict the actual world in psychoses, hallucinations, and dreams. Thanks to the camera, therefore, the individual perception of the psychotic or the dreamer can be approved by collective perception.¹⁴

Taking the concept of aura as their point of departure, Strindberg and Benjamin tried to grasp the hidden meanings behind the signs as depicted by the camera in the age of new technologies.

'CELESTIAL BODIES' – CONSTELLATIONS AND CORRESPONDENCES

The bottles with the Spanish wine *Celeste*, from the Ribera del Duero region, are decorated with stellar constellations on a white or blue background. *Celestial* can refer to astronomy, to heavenly constellations, or point towards the supremely good – something that is not of this world. When Strindberg made his celestographs, he placed the plates directly on the ground and waited for the reaction: that they should reflect the starry sky. The pictures looked like stars, and even though the pattern was more likely to be just dust or to come from the chemical reactions on the plates, Strindberg saw them as magical connections between something earthly and the stars above, something mysterious.

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Walter Benjamin:

Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars.¹⁵

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November 7, 1872: The brigantine *Mary Celeste* sets out from New York on her way to Genoa, with twelve people on board and a cargo of 1701 holders of poisonous, denatured alcohol. On November 3, Captain Benjamin Briggs wrote to his mother: "Our vessel is in beautiful trim and I hope we shall have a fine passage".¹⁶

But something went wrong. On 5 December, just off the Portuguese and Spanish coast, the British brigantine *Dei Gratia* notices a drifting ship; "and as the vessels drew close, he [the captain, Morehouse] could see nobody on deck, and he received no reply to his signals", so he sent out two men, Deveau and Wright, in a rescue boat to investigate. From the name on her stern, the pair established that this was the *Mary Celeste*. "They then climbed aboard, where they found the ship deserted".¹⁷

This tale resembles 'The Pilot's Trials' so far. By the grace of God, (*Dei Gratia*) the ship was saved but the crew had mysteriously disappeared into thin air.

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Strindberg might have heard the story of the ghost ship *Mary Celeste*: he was twenty-three years old at the time. What he knew for sure was the story of another ghost ship, as told by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in the epic poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798). He refers to some verses of Coleridge in 'The Pilot's Trials': the pilot reads some lines from Coleridge, and the content hits him like a stroke of lightning.

Coleridge had read Swedenborg with great interest. He even intended to write an essay on Swedenborg's books about dreams. Coleridge was also "familiar with the doctrine of correspondences".¹⁸ In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the mariner is desperate to tell his story: all his crewmates are dead. Is he a messenger from the other side?

Both stories, Coleridge's and Strindberg's, cross the borders between everyday life and the hidden mystical other, between the so-called reality and the so-called unreal.

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Marxism and Jewish mysticism, historical materialism and Kabbalah: Benjamin is known for what Theodor W. Adorno called "the configuration of the incompatible".¹⁹ In 1935, Benjamin based the armature of the artwork essay on Marx and the theory of the means and conditions of production in the new technological age. According to Susan Buck-Morss, Benjamin sketches in the same year a new disposition for *The Arcades project*, mainly based on Jewish mysticism, Kabbalah. In Buck-Morss' opinion, we cannot understand the work unless we see "this hidden theological armature": "Because its material is so thoroughly profane, one can indeed describe the *Passagen-Werk* without mentioning theology or the Kabbalah. Yet the whole project is only arbitrary and aesthetic, carrying no philosophical conviction, if the invisible theological armature is ignored."²⁰

Benjamin did not write much on Kabbalah, but to his friend Adorno, he mentioned that one had to have the knowledge of Kabbalah to understand his book on the German *Trauerspiel*.²¹ In his dedication to Gerhard Scholem, he wrote that he donated this book to

Scholem's «Kabbalist library». Benjamin's two main works were thus both committed to Kabbalah.

During the period between 1935 and 1940, Benjamin also worked on a book on Baudelaire, a book meant to be a miniature model of *The Arcades project*. He sketches the disposition for this book as a system of coordinates, in fact the fundamental coordinates of the modern world:

'The schemata of coordinates have, in the optimal case eleven concepts: four for the termini of the axes, four for the fields, two for the axes, one for the point of intersection'. And more: for 'the schematism' of the book's 'third part' (that, please recall, was to demonstrate its 'conspicuous convergence' with the thoughts of *The Arcades project*), there was to stand at the 'middle of the crossing axes,' that image which since 1934 had stood at the 'midpoint' of the Arcades project: 'the commodity'.²²

This system of coordinates is clearly kabbalist, for it corresponds with the tree of life in Kabbalah, which is the central symbol in Jewish mysticism as a model of reality. This tree consists of ten circles with crossing lines between them, with the possibility of placing an eleventh circle in the middle: *da'at*, knowledge. In Benjamin's secular model, this knowledge is replaced by the knowledge of the central concept in Marx: commodity fetishism.²³

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"Just one step from atheism to Swedenborg", Strindberg wrote in *Inferno*.²⁴ Like Benjamin, Strindberg was both a materialist and a mystic, a socialist and an anarchist, who over the years grew more and more interested in Kabbalah. The first period of Strindberg's work is not as known in Europe as in the Nordic countries. The reception of Strindberg was very divided: some, including Georg Lukács and Leo Löwenthal, viewed him as politically reactionary, degenerate and introverted.²⁵ The more traditionally conservative ideologists, however, never approved of Strindberg. But Ulf Olsson defines Strindberg as a reactionary in opposition to the common political lines, saying that Strindberg was reactionary in the sense of someone who always reacted.

According to Ulf Olsson, Strindberg was the most important playwright in Europe between 1912 and 1920, and Strindberg had a strategic presence in both Walter Benjamin's and Theodor W. Adorno's thinking. For Benjamin and Adorno, Strindberg, with his fragmented way of writing, was the most advanced playwright, and as Olsson writes, they both repeatedly refer to Strindberg as a kind of Virgil in a profane comedy: with Strindberg, we move down into the darkest abyss of late capitalism – its code-name being *catastrophe*. Olsson also points to the fact that in Strindberg's last play, *The Great Highway* (1909), the arcade, and with it the world of reified relations, has turned into a nightmarish world that demands not only the writer's soul but also his body. For Benjamin, Strindberg was a kind of prophet. However, there is no sign that Benjamin recognised the same split, or rather, the same configuration in Strindberg's writings as in his own: the configuration of the incompatible.

Strindberg was heavily influenced by the Paris Commune in 1871, and in his early writings, Strindberg turned to naturalism, realism and socialism. His novel *The Red Room* (1879) is regarded as the first truly modern novel in the Nordic countries. It was a shocking book about societal misery, and about revolutionaries meeting in the cafés to discuss their critique of the existing society and the upper classes. In his screenplay *Miss Julie* (1888), class differences and class struggle are a main theme, and he continued to reveal the established and prevailing society as unjust. During his so-called 'Inferno crisis', he discovered Swedenborg and turned to mysticism and a new interest in the subconscious. In *Inferno* (1896–97), he for the first time writes about Swedenborg, and in *En blå bok (A Blue Book)*, from 1907–1912, translated into English already in 1913 with the title *Zones of the Spirit: a Book of Thoughts*, he writes extensively about Swedenborg, correspondences, mysticism – and Kabbalah.²⁶ Even in this book, though, he continues to satirize Swedish society, especially the upper classes, and he still writes about class antagonisms. In a poem written in 1902, he declares his support for the worker's movement, and on his sixtieth birthday in 1909, he was greeted by nearly fifteen thousand people marching in a demonstration organized by the trade unions and the workers' movement.

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August Strindberg:

Thus Zohar, the wisest of all the books of wisdom,
and therefore one that no one believes.²⁷

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Swedenborg's *Arcana Caelestia*: *Arcana* comes from *arcere*, meaning 'to shut something up' or 'a chest of drawers' – where a treasure lies hidden, a secret.

Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*: *Arcade* comes from *arcus*, meaning bow.

Strindberg's *Inferno*: when its protagonist, walking in Paris, sees his own initials on a shop window and a rainbow *arched* over them, he takes that as an omen – he calls out *Omen accipio!* – and is reminded of a *passage* in Genesis: "I have set my bow in the clouds to be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth".²⁸

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This link between the earth and the heavens – is that not the kabbalist secret?

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In reading *Arcana Caelestia*, Strindberg underlines a sentence from Swedenborg: "*vinduet är det förståndiga*" – "the window is the wisdom", and he writes in the margin: "*Zohar is window, Zohar is light*".

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In Benjamin's account of the passages, the arcades have no windows, i.e. we cannot look out of the arcades, «what is true has no windows, nowhere does the true look out to the universe» [Q2a,7]. But inside the arcades there are windows, from where we can look into the passages, into the truth: «What stands within the windowless house is the true» [Q2a,7]. The true is the phantasmagoric world of the commodity. Looking into the arcades we get the knowledge, *da'at*, in the circle of wisdom, as described in Moses de Leon's (1240-1305) *Zohar. The Book of Splendour*.²⁹

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On Walter Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben writes:

We ought to contribute to the acknowledgement that there aren't two 'Benjamins' – one mystical and one materialistic, – and that the division lies not in Benjamin himself, but in our culture, the culture that – split in an opposition between rationalism and irrationalism, where the one is the mirror of the other and the two complement each other – has lost the ability to see praxis in a unified and not metaphysical way.³⁰

The same applies to Strindberg, and that is the most material and mystical constellation between Strindberg and Benjamin.

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Charakteristik Walter Benjamins', *Prismen. Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*, (Suhrkamp, 1973), pp. 283-301, pp. 288-289.

² Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing. Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, (The MIT Press, 1989), p. 64.

³ Louis Aragon, *Le Paysan de Paris*, (Gallimard, 1926), p. 29.

⁴ August Strindberg, *Tales*, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.126564>, p. 48.

⁵ Ulf Olsson, 'Snäckornas sagor: Anmärkningar till Strindbergs passagearbeten', in *Strindbergiana*, (Atlantis 1992), pp.114-125.

⁶ August Strindberg, *Inferno*, https://archive.org/details/inferno_00striuoft, p. 169.

⁷ *Inferno*, p. 129.

⁸ *Inferno*, p. 170.

⁹ <https://www.tcf.ua.edu/Classes/Jbutler/T340/SurManifesto/ManifestoOfSurrealism.htm>, p. 24.

¹⁰ August Strindberg, *A Dream Play*, <https://archive.org/details/playsbyauguststr015141mbp>, p. 24.

¹¹ From the Exhibition *Strindberg som fotograf*, Riksställningar & Strindbergmuseet, 2016 (1995/2012), Stockholm.

¹² Siegfried Kracauer, 'Die Photographie', in *Ornament der Masse, Essays*, (Suhrkamp, 1963), pp. 21-39, 'On Photography', *The Mass Ornament, Weimar Essays*, translated, edited and with an introduction by Thomas Y. Levin, (Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 47-64, pp. 56-57.

¹³ Walter Benjamin, 'Small History of Photography', *On Photography, Walter Benjamin*, edited and translated by Esther Leslie, (Reaktion Books, 2015), pp. 53-107, p. 68.

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, 'The Artwork in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility', *Selected Writings III*, pp. 117-118.

¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue', in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, (Verso 1998), p. 34.

¹⁶ Charles Edey Fay, *The Story of the Mary Celeste* (Dover Publications, 1988), p. 9.

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- ¹⁷ Brian Hicks, *Ghost Ship: The Mysterious True Story of the Mary Celeste and her Missing Crew*, (Random House, 2004), pp. 73-75.
- ¹⁸ Richard Lines, 'Coleridge and Swedenborg', *Things Heard and Seen*, the Newsletter of the Swedenborg Society, London, No. 1 (Spring 2000), pp. 2-3.
- ¹⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Einleitung zu Benjamins Schriften', *Noten zur Literatur*, IV, (Suhrkamp, 1974), pp. 105-126, p. 122.
- ²⁰ Buck-Morss, op. cit., p. 233.
- ²¹ Buck-Morss, p. 229.
- ²² Benjamin quoted in Buck-Morss, p. 214.
- ²³ We have written extensively on this in our introduction to our Norwegian translation of *Das Passagenwerk*, *Passasjeverket I-II*, 1485 pp., (Vidarforlaget, 2017), pp. 9-103.
- ²⁴ *Inferno*, p. 129.
- ²⁵ Ulf Olsson, 'Strindberg goes to Frankfurt: Critical Theory and the Reactionary Writer', *Scandinavian Studies*, Vol. 84, No. 3, Fall 2012, pp. 249-272.
- ²⁶ The Swedish version is 1134 pages, the English translation is about a quarter of the book.
- ²⁷ Strindberg, the end of *The Road to Damaskus II*, <http://www.public-library.uk/pdfs/3/487.pdf>
- ²⁸ *Inferno*, p. 23.
- ²⁹ Gershom Scholem, *Zohar. The Book of Splendor. Basic Readings from the Kabbalah*, (Schocken Books, 1949/1977).
- ³⁰ Giorgio Agamben, Introduction to *Opere di Walter Benjamin. Edizione italiana a cura de Giorgio Agamben, Vol I: Metafisica della gioventù. Scritti 1910-1918* (Torino 1982), quoted in Momme Brodersen, 'Kommentierte (Auswahl-)Bibliographie der italienischen Benjamin-Rezeption', *Benjamin auf Italienisch*, (Verlag Neue Kritik, 1982), pp. 143-159, p. 150.