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The Dialectic of Space: An Untimely Proposal

Ideology is a heap of problems, goodness knows, largely because we always hear the same old things about it: There is no escape from ideology. Everyone knows we're acting ideologically and nobody cares (plus it's fun or hilarious). There is no ideology anymore. Makes you wonder whether there's an ideology about ideology itself, seeing as these claims are now slogans or chants. At the very least, ideology is very much a manner of speaking. To talk about ideology is to tell of your "place" within it, your "position," where you stand (left or right), your "standpoint," your orientation in the "ideological field" or "landscape"—it is to say something about how ideology opens up gaps and "spaces," the manner in which it has "dimensions," the way it is "everywhere" and has no "outside," the way we're in it and it thus needs "mapping," and so forth. These are commonplaces in critical writing, so ubiquitous that we hardly notice them, but maybe there's something to them, in their very consistency, because they express, time and again, spatial concerns. To assert that the problem of ideology is a spatial one is hardly news. Yet to say that ideology is itself space, or that space is ideology, is another matter. For ideology—if I may be permitted the personification—this topic is a touchy one

it'd rather avoid addressing. Ideology isn't dumb, after all. It's learned by now not to spoon feed us ideas, telling us what exactly to say, but it does salt our sentences with just enough spatial metaphors to dimensionalize our point of view and impute profundity to our insight, *so that* we don't go farther into the spatial problem, farther into the fundamental questions of matter and materiality that in the history of philosophy almost always attend reflections on space.¹ It's as if ideology wants us to believe that it has space totally covered.

Does it? Ideology tells us it has space covered precisely because it doesn't. This is because ideology dwells differently among the various media of human expression, and this difference is significant. Ideology feels right at home in areas like language, time, consciousness and subjectivity, such that ideology is often said to be exactly these things (or, for some academic reactionaries, *never ever* these things!). And it's at these "sites" where we always expect to find it. Ideology, though, feels less welcome in the domains of space and matter. It manages, of course. But it should take no special pleading to assert that ideology does space differently to words, making it easier to identify ideology in language (as ideas, as ideologemes, as conflicts in meaning) rather than in cities, for example, which are accretions of praxes and complexes of material forces beyond words or even conceptualization; it's axiomatic, for example, that all the great "city novels" are a thousand pages long and yet still come up short in their portrayal of urban space.²

The problem of critiquing ideology, then, is as much about the differences in media as it is about ideology. And because the problem is really about both, we need to think dialectically and first contemplate the contradiction between disparate media, like language and matter, whose interrelation is always in question—that is, always a dynamic and already a dialectic. Our task, in other words, is to test for ideology's allergies. It is to pit ideology's best media—like language and time—against its worst, most conceptually fraught media, like matter and space, and see how this helps the critique of ideology and fosters constructive counter-hegemonic practices. It is to acknowledge the fact that language codes meaning differently from matter (which itself means nothing), that time codes experience differently from space, and that ideology tries to convince us otherwise in its penchant to homogenize everything as identical, persuading us that, no, language *is* materiality or that time *is* space.³ Ideology, in this effort, has it made, because as critical theorists we often enable it, or even do its work, in that we frequently seem to temporalize space and textualize matter, thus helping ideology cross the gap between time and space, language and matter. I therefore propose an untimely critique that is attentive to the dialectic of space. For if space continually exceeds

ideology, failing to conform to it, and vice versa, then our critique of ideology could be mindful of this gap and aware of this very difference in temporal and spatial media, even if it seems that the pressures of our present render time and space indistinguishable in everyday perception. Two things stand out, then. First, this dialectic of space would be powerful enough to “break the bricks”⁴ of ideology with an adamantine model of “material contradiction” that’s quite unlike the easy temporal contradictions often associated with dialectics, as well as most philosophy as such. Our regard for the spatial dialectic, in other words, lays bare the limits of ideology in ways we’ve yet to theorize or for that matter systematize. Second, with its unrelenting, unapologetic *spatiality*—a dialectic of space can be seen to gum up the temporal processes of ideological reproduction just long enough to open up a space within ideology, and outside it, before time returns, with great haste and acceleration, to move us along as if there’s nothing here to see.

Ideology, Contradiction, and the Dialectic

Before going any farther, we should try to say what ideology is. What it is is what it does. Whether we define ideology as a “representation” or chalk it up to some feature of the “imaginary,” per Althusser in his famous sweeping sentence,⁵ whether instead we decide to talk of institutions and disciplines as ideology by another name, like Foucault,⁶ or whether we call ideology “bad [ruling] ideas”—whatever we say ideology *is*—we all know what it *does*. It messes around with contradiction. There are different accounts of what exactly ideology does with contradiction, and—on the flipside—accounts of what contradiction does to ideology. Does ideology cover up social antagonisms we’d rather not discuss (it’s uncivil!), or cannot put into words, or cannot even think? Or does ideology worsen these antagonisms, sharpening them, making things shittier and shittier for more and more people? These questions are raised in the work of Althusser, Macherey, Jameson, and Žižek.⁷ There’s a shared language among our four friends here: primarily Lacan and Hegel, pro or con—in other words, yes, Hegel. But let’s recognize that this talk of contradictoriness goes back to Marx and Engels, who in the *German Ideology* write:

In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here it is a matter of ascending from earth to heaven. That is to say, not of setting out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh;

but setting out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process demonstrating the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the brains of men are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, and all the rest of ideology as well as the forms of consciousness corresponding to these, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. (1975–2005: 5,36–37)

This is that notorious passage, roundly descried for reducing our minds, our subjectivity, to goings-on at the material “base.” You won’t find Althusser, Macherey, Jameson, and Žižek talking like this about ideology, saying these exact things, but—then again—aren’t Marx and Engels showing that ideology is itself contradiction—that it *is* this very splitting into of all of these fields? It’s the nature of ideology *to divide* and ramify into “Morality, religion, metaphysics,” along with whatever else is meant by “all the rest of ideology,” which includes—as Marx and Engels show deeper into the *German Ideology*—the natural sciences, political economy, politics, history, philosophy, and (false) “true socialism.” Ideology disperses itself. It reaches into every area of social life and finds advantage in the variety of human inquiry, how, say, experimental science isn’t exactly religion, yet both are, fundamentally, “ideology.” Through such difference making—indeed, by generating points of view in contradiction to one another—ideology expands itself across society into places where people do all and sundry things, conducting science, practicing religion, espousing political economy, and the like.

Marx and Engels have received untold grief for writing the aforementioned passage, but there’s a hard kernel of truth to it: the thesis that ideology is simply a reflex and echo of a “material life-process” and “material premises” is to say quite explicitly that *ideology isn’t materiality*. At best, ideology is materiality with an asterisk. See, we’ve gotten hung up on the vulgar causation described in that passage, worrying about how reductive it seems to construe our thoughts as reflexes, echoes, and phantom presences of the lawful mechanics of the material base. But we’ve paid less attention to the fact that, here at least, ideology is not matter. Nor is it space. Rather, ideology flatters matter and mimics space. It shadows matter, spreading out and spatializing itself as if it were, like matter, synonymous with extension, as if it had volume. Ideology permeates society by “krisis [κρίσις],” division and separation, which—as the ancient and medieval philosophers show—is exactly how you think matter in its elemental or atomic configurations (Cole 2020). And that’s the kicker: for if we are constrained to think ideology as if it were

matter, we're close to believing that ideology is matter. Advantage ideology, which is always ideology, in the same way that ideas and ideals are but phantoms seeking embodiment, playing the part of materiality as "real presences," which articles of faith can't convince us *are* in fact matter or body. So there's a problem for us here: as long as we think about ideology in the same way we think about matter, we do ideology a favor (and we commit fetishism). This is a significant issue besetting the critique of ideology, with the unsettling fact that "krisis," whence "critique" gets its name, is how ideology works by dint of fissiparation.

Matters of the Dialectic

It's a problem for the dialectic, too, which is supposed to help us in the critique of ideology. If Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977: 66) has just one thing to teach us, it's that you can think the dialectic in all of its poses, all of its incalculable degrees of opposition, all of its intensity and stakes (like life and death). But it also teaches us that dialectics involves embodiment, desire, feelings and emotions, and more generally language itself, "which belongs to consciousness." Ideology feels right at home in these areas, too. It is always filching the materials of the dialectic itself—language, narrative, desire, subjectivity, and consciousness. So what's needed, I propose, is a dialectic purposely composed of matters different from ideology. We require a dialectic grounded in a medium unlike the common ones that ideology appropriates when it takes up language, narrative, desire, subjectivity, consciousness and of course time and the condition of "being in time"—which is to say, temporality. This would involve a dialectics that is unrelentingly *spatial* and unapologetically *material*, with the expressed intent to devalue time and jam up the temporal processes of ideological reproduction, whose raw materials (language, narrative, desire, subjectivity, consciousness), we appropriate so often that we find ourselves always in the same bind as to what's what, what's ideology and what's critique—a problem that goes all the way back to Marx's remarks (and complaints) in his famous postface to the second edition of *Capital* where he says that his dialectical method can "appear" strikingly similar to the object he's analyzing, capital (Marx 1977: 102). In other words, if the dialectic is going to be different from ideology, and if indeed its kind of contradiction is to be distinct, then we need, in sum, our own raw materials—our own matter—because the current raw materials (language, narrative, desire, subjectivity, consciousness) aren't material enough. Too many asterisks.

Now, Barthes (1968) in his *Elements of Semiology* spoke of ideology, language, and matter in turns, as if each is the other. But with due respect for all he did for the unspoken “language” of clothes, we know this isn’t the case. They are all dissimilar media, which even Althusser (2014: 259) could admit in his work on ideology as he puzzled over what makes hard and durable materiality different from, well, most everything else in culture we’re comfortable calling “material”: “Of course, the material existence of the ideology in an apparatus and its practices does not have the same modality as the material existence of a paving-stone or a rifle.”⁸ He means to say that, yes, institutions and actions are material, involved as they are in every aspect of our life worlds, acting on our bodies. But they’re not material in the same manner as “a paving-stone or a rifle.” Right?

Althusser’s phrase, “a paving-stone or a rifle,” is a bit of a throwaway line, but it’s useful. Althusser implies that the paving stone is as much a weapon as the rifle, likely bearing in mind the events of May 1968 when student protestors in the streets of Paris defended themselves with rocks they toed up out the avenues, hurling them at riot police and using them to build barricades. But he also wants us to think of these two items as a different kind of materiality no less. What if, for example, there were something differently revolutionary in the “paving stone”—not the paving stone as a ballistic missile but the paving stone as a piece of inert material, a stone, once set in place in that street by someone’s hands? What if *that* kind of materiality, a materiality that comprises our built environment, a materiality that is a piece of our carpentered world, could be just what the dialectic needs to get some *material distance* from ideology, dwelling as ideology does in the materials it knows and loves best, like language, subjectivity, consciousness, time, and history? Althusser couldn’t quite bring that paving stone to ideology, owing to the fundamental clash of media or matters: stone and the ideological apparatus. I sympathize. Rightly, he couldn’t bring himself to say that the stone is inherently dialectical, for then he’d lapse into vital materialism, which is a common undialectical destination (Cole 2016) for those who’ve blown right past the crucial part about this being a “paving” stone, a stone that is worked. Althusser couldn’t go all vitalist. But he also couldn’t go back to an old school “historical materialism” of the Hegelian cast where all that matters is that the stone is fashioned, that nature is shaped, that matter is formed—materiality is almost always worked on.⁹

That’s not all that matters, of course, which is why we need a better approach. Sartre looks at the problem of the paving stone through the lens of the “practico-inert.” Marx (1977: 994) names it “dead labor.” We’ll return to

Marx below where he and Engels anticipate Sartre in proposing a phenomenology of the built environment (in their critique of Hegel and Feuerbach). For now, let's note that in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, on my reading, Sartre was trying to develop a materially materialist theory of ideology in the way Althusser found difficult to formulate—materialist in the sense pertaining to the durable pieces of our built environment, what's been laid down before our generation came along to do our bidding—a material, concrete (as in cement) world that precedes our essence. Now, Sartre uses this term, “practico-inert,” to talk about seriality, groups, and collectives. Unquestionably, matter and space play a lead role in the drama of the collective—as my discussion of Fanon below indicates—but my focus here is simply to point out that in offering this new term, Sartre attempted to reboot the Marxist vocabulary about ideology by thinking about the matter of our built environment, as itself a production: concretized labor and human effort called praxis. Our surroundings are layered with these past praxes, these past forms of life. They are not buried. But they are foundational. What's sedimented into our built environment lingers there as passivities that are *activated* every time we engage them—in the case of the paving stone: walking, cycling, laying pipe, weaponizing stones into “rocks,” repurposing the paver for the wall of a new building, stacking it with other stones in a garden as an ornament, hauling it off to be ground to gravel, etc. To be sure, these sedimented praxes are often preconscious for us, beneath our notice until they are pointed out (unless we're moving about with the “attentive concentration of a tourist” ogling at old buildings, as Benjamin says in his most well-known essay [1969: 240], “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility”¹⁰). But it doesn't take much to notice. Just look up and out onto the context in which we find the paving stone as part of a walkway, which directs our bodies this way rather than that, up the slope, then down. Quite honestly, and apart from the obviously germane topic of architecture as social control (see below), what's more ideological than the fact that our very motion in the world, through social space, is predetermined by people before us who built up our infrastructures and architectures? The deer path that's the Lenni Lenape footpath that's the settler's wagon track that's the commuter's highway. Foundation on foundation, floor upon roof.

Sartre took the “practico-inert” in a direction different from ours, mindful as we are not only that space is power but that you can't believe the hype about the “City of Tomorrow”—the future hope of the modern city that, after Le Corbusier, razes what came before it. For we must reckon with, indeed bear responsibility for, how the “practico-inert” takes shape, and how

these inertial forces shape us in turn. This is because Le Corbusier's ([1929] 2013: 244) modernizing slogan that "We must construct for today" already insists on the impossible, the "clearing away from our cities the dead bones that putrefy in them."¹¹ If that be our aim, we'll never finish, never stop "clearing," a word that is also suspiciously central to Heidegger's conception of built space premised on "clearing away" or *Räumen* (1973). For "clearing" is an action against and through inertial praxes, just as it is a way to bulldoze through people's lives, lands, houses, and "homes." Some made a science of this, in the cases of Eugène Viollet-le-Duc and Gustavo Giovannoni, seeking to build over, around, or with, medieval structures in the nineteenth and early twentieth century; or Georges-Eugène Haussmann, whose renovation of Paris' narrow medieval alleys assured that the military could fire cannons down those new wide boulevards to "clear" them of rioters, as both Marx and Engels observed.¹² Some made a policy of clearing, per the malpractices of "urban renewal" in the US, placing highways or (white) student dorms over Black neighborhoods and academic buildings over slave cemeteries.¹³ That well-known example of postmodern architecture and finance capital in Los Angeles, the Wells Fargo Center, stems from just such a program of "renewal." The complex itself sits on what was once Bunker Hill, a neighborhood that was subject to a long "revitalization" involving the eviction of thousands of residents, the raising of old Victorian homes once converted into boarding houses for workers, and a total leveling of the hill itself (Klein 1977: 51–58)—all by the impetus of the Housing Act of 1949 and its terms of art: *clearance*, the "clearance of slums," to "clear the land" for "building construction on the cleared sites" (Committee on Banking and Currency 1949: 1–2). *Räumen*: this is what flattens space, and levels land and mountains, into ideology. Globally, there are incalculably other instances like this that can be studied in the work of "forensic architecture" (directed by the architect Eyal Weizman, including collaborations with Eduardo Cadava, Fazal Sheikh, Paulo Tavares, among many others). And in almost every case what's erased is what persists, materially, in one way or another, in one place or another. Such material presences—at once inert and active—generate something like a gravitational field around them, to which people the world over are drawn, and for which they fight with care, commitment, preservation, and documentation.

It's easy to see quite how ideological these inertial matters are when they move from the preconscious to the conscious to outright awareness of the violences of segregation and colonization that break bodies. Many inertial praxes require survival strategies, *survivance* everywhere every day. Put that way, the distinction between ISAs and RSAs, as we have in Althusser, seems quaintly

academic, as both set out, in the end, to *put you in your place*. To which Franz Fanon in *Black Face, White Masks* says fuck that. He lays out the problem clearly and with explicit engagement with Sartre. First, he explains that “Sartre has shown that the past, along the lines of an inauthentic mode, catches on and ‘takes’ en masse, and, once solidly structured, then gives *form* to the individual. It is the past transmuted into a thing of value.” The past is so “solidly structured,” so built and baked into what we already are, as to shape and distort consciousness, to give “*form* to the individual” living in the present. When Fanon ([1952] 2008: 202, 205) declares that the “density of History determines none of my acts. I am my own foundation,” he is thinking dialectically, spatially, and materially. He is saying that the density of history has a habit determining people’s acts and “assigning” them (in the Sartrean language) foundations. He knows what place does to people.

But Fanon also knows what people can do to place. For in *Wretched of the Earth* ([1963] 2003: 141; see 142, 43; see Sartre 1991: 716–34), he proposes something close to a spatial dialectic to remake those very foundations:

during the period of nation building every citizen must continue in his daily purpose to embrace the nation as a whole, to embody the constantly dialectical truth of the nation, and to will here and now the triumph of man in his totality. If the building of a bridge does not enrich the consciousness of those working on it, then don’t build the bridge, and let the citizens continue to swim across the river or use a ferry. The bridge must not be pitchforked or foisted upon the social landscape by a *deus ex machina*, but, on the contrary, must be the product of the citizens’ brains and muscles. And there is no doubt architects and engineers, foreigners for the most part, will probably be needed, but the local party leaders must see to it that the techniques seep into the desert of the citizen’s brain so that the bridge in its entirety and in every detail can be integrated, redesigned, and reappropriated. The citizen must appropriate the bridge. Then, and only then, is everything possible.

This is poiesis for the people. For Fanon, the building project—and what he calls on the next page, “major public works projects” (142)—goes deep and is fundamentally dialectical in the relays between exteriority and interiority: to “appropriate the bridge” is to think the bridge, be the bridge, live the bridge, and make the bridge. Fanon is deeply aware that to do a meaningful “materialism” is to take it all the way out to the built environment and all the way down (again) to the deepest level of *social being*, where your ground, your foundation, is what’s made collectively. When he says “every citizen must . . . embody the constantly dialectical truth of the nation,” he means an

embodiment that materializes into your very being the built environment you help bring into existence and that issues from your interior. For to participate in a collective is not to be a part. It is to be a whole. This is why Fanon's passage can be read as an open letter to "architects and engineers." Don't flatten (your professional) fields into ideology. Don't clear. Help us build to make ourselves whole, constructing infrastructures and public spaces that issue from our deep sociality. As a critique of ideology, then, the spatial dialectic isn't limited to phenomenology and perception precisely because it includes practice—praxes past, present, and future. It's a dialectic activated by those who work it, walking the path, moving the stone, designing and building the bridge.

There's no use in speaking of the past in anything but these material terms, in the same way that talk of the present is pointless without asking just where the built environment, redolent with its inertial praxes, resides in social life and, one step farther, just where and what social life fundamentally "is." Let there be no talk of philosophical "grounds" without talk of grounds, no "foundations" without foundations, no "structure" without structure, no "edifice" without edifice, no "architecture" without architecture. Eschew hauntologies that dematerialize our world and naturalize the past as just so many traces, specters, and palimpsests (i.e., "texts"). Even if we remain mesmerized by an auratic and immaterial model of the past, we are forced to observe its many spatializations and materializations in plain language, as if our own words and instincts bend toward that "paving stone." How so? We commonly say the past "lives" in memory. But as the mnemonic techniques from antiquity to the present tell us, such "living memory" has its place, its own building—those "palaces" and avenues of the mind down which you saunter pausing at doorways, entering rooms, browsing shelves, and probing cubbies in the retrieval of stored information. This is why we say an event in the past "took place," that we say, "I was there." This is why we say someone "dwells" in the past, wandering through its discrete spaces and seeking shelter against the winds of time and the wine-dark seas of change. One word for this longing, of course, is "nostalgia"—which means "homesickness" or νόστος ἄλγος (nostos algos; return home, sorrow). Even when we're not constructing actual "sites of memory" (the subject of Pierre Nora's [1984–86] *Les Lieux de Mémoire*), we're doing it in our heads, writing about it, and creating images of times past stacked into place, as when the pile of sand at the bottom of the hourglass means time's up.

Think Benjamin's "angel of history": "a pile of debris before him grows skyward" like a monument to calamity, over which a storm brews as winds

rage from the same direction, “from Paradise” but in name only. The angel of history views things differently: “His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet” (1969: 257–58). Though he apprehends neither time nor succession, he still beholds eventfulness, the pile of rubble continuing to grow at his feet. He’s the historical materialist who finds history actively materialized, not emptily temporalized via “historicism” (see 255–56, 262). To him, the past is a cumulative material force in the troubled present, the now (*Jetztzeit*), while the future is that *no-place* called utopia to which he is blown backwards, wings akimbo.

Part of the problem is recognizing just where we are, and what modes of perception are required to develop a phenomenology of the built space. While Hegel’s dialectic will (below) offer one way to advance such a phenomenology—as a dialectic of space attending to material, rather than linguistic, contradiction—this philosopher himself would occasionally see right through such spaces, making it hard for readers themselves to know just where they are. Take his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in particular, the chapter on “sense certainty” which is one of Hegel’s most read pieces of writing. It’s full of objects and packed with exposition—with the lesson being that no matter how much we try to “look carefully,” regardless of how *simply* we describe what we see, pointing at things to bring them to someone else’s attention, we’ll never find “meaning” in its Sunday best, never discover “certainty” (Hegel 1977: 59). Sense-certainty is an oxymoron, in this respect.

But once we finish reading Hegel’s discussion of sense-certainty, the very first chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, we realize we’ve been places. We recollect that over many pages, Hegel introduces a variety of things serially, a house, a tree, a piece of paper, and dilates about them, such that they separate and float apart from one another until they disconnect, spaced out by the prose rather than dimensionalized into an image, figure, or “scene” (Hegel 1977: 61–66). And so it’s left to us to set these items in the storehouse of our memory, look back on the totality of what we’ve read, and see that “sense-certainty” is indeed a “scene,” a built environment, where we behold our protagonist trying to “reach out into space and time” or “enter into it” (Hegel 1977; 61 [see 56]; 58). For one, it’s a place that’s *produced*, composed of things made, worked on, and cultivated: house, tree, paper.¹⁴ The house is built. The tree is planted. The paper is milled, and soon (if not already in Hegel’s time) to be industrially produced. As Hegel writes, focusing on the “house or tree” in turns, you can virtually see him on location, looking around, pointing at the house that’s shaded by the tree, planted there to

shade the house and provide “landscape” as you look from the lane—all there, as sure as day turns to night and words fail us. As the scene blends into the next chapter on “Perception: Or The Thing and Deception,” Hegel continues the story, such as it is, to speak of “salt”—again, in no random way, because of course he didn’t mine the salt himself. It too is produced, and he finds the salt inside that same house, likely on the table, where sits the very piece of paper he’s been staring at the whole time (Hegel 1977: 60, 66)—that is, when he’s not staring down the salt, as if in imitation of George Segal’s “Man at a Table.” This is not an easy scene for readers to see, and to picture it requires compression that reduces these many pages of dry exposition to one page, even one sentence, of ekphrastic description. However challenging it is to imagine the place here, once you see it, you can’t unsee it.

Hegel can often make matters difficult for readers. He could have just said he was on the front walk of a house or in a room, you know, *set the scene*—even Kant does us this courtesy every once and while, as when he speaks of a cozy warm room in the first critique! Yet what Hegel shows us—on purpose and by accident—is how roundly everyone ignores the built environment, our *produced* surroundings, during our most intense inspections, glaring at things and piecing them apart in a manner of philosophical demonstration that anticipates Heidegger’s (1967) work on equipmental totalities. The lesson for us, in reading Hegel, is how routinely we, too, see through things, how deeply into words praxis can quickly sink, such that the built environment becomes a matter of word play, language games, texts and “texturology.”¹⁵ So I am not confident that the various ways to construe the built environment “as a language” is a help here, as we see in architectural theory from at least the eighteenth century on, starting with aesthetics about the “symbolism” of architecture (of course, Hegel is in this mix) and leading up to contributions by Mukařovsky in the 1930s, Summerson in the 1960s, and Zevi and Jencks in the 1970s, to say nothing of the application of “literary theory” to architectural analysis or even, perhaps, architecture parlante in the US, where, like the chicken in every pot, every building gets a motto. For to move the problem of built space quickly into one of “language” not only takes us away from our experiment with how to think the materiality of the “paving stone,” but it draws us towards ideology, which of course loves language. Tafuri’s (1976: 3, 8, 15, 50, 60–62, 149, 156, 158–60, 169) work in *Architecture and Utopia* in this respect is a necessary critique of the language of architecture, and the practice of style, *as ideology* (which involves all manner of contradiction, mind you).

So we go back to Marx and Engels, returning to the *German Ideology*. For them, any practice of “sense-certainty” that breezes right by the questions of production as you look around is itself a piece of “German ideology”—let’s just call it “ideology.” Laying into Feuerbach for his incurious gaze upon his surroundings, they write:

Even the objects of the simplest “sensuous certainty” are only given him through social development, industry and commercial intercourse. The cherry-tree, like almost all fruit-trees, was, as is well known, only a few centuries ago transplanted by commerce into our zone, and therefore only by this action of a definite society in a definite age it has become “sensuous certainty.” (1975–2005: 5.39)

Commerce put the cherry-tree here, but now to Feuerbach’s sight the tree itself is—like Hegel’s tree by the house—naturalized into the environment and abstracted from previous praxes, earlier production processes. This is no way of looking, for—as they continue to say, jokingly—“when things are seen in this way, as they really are and happened, every profound philosophical problem is resolved.” They really hit home this point in a footnote, declaring that “he cannot in the last resort cope with the sensuous world except by looking at it with the ‘eyes,’ i.e., through the ‘spectacles,’ of the *philosopher*” (Marx and Engels 1975–2005: 5.39). Seen that way, the world just becomes empirical facts before us, and we see right through them, through what makes an obvious “fact” as a “thing done,” which is not so obvious but which opens up the question of production.¹⁶

Continuing to rib Feuerbach, Marx and Engels extend this comment on perception, saying that

in Manchester Feuerbach sees only factories and machines, where a hundred years ago only spinning-wheels and weaving-rooms were to be seen, or in the Campagna of Rome he finds only pasture lands and swamps, where in the time of Augustus he would have found nothing but the vineyards and villas of Roman capitalists. Feuerbach speaks in particular of the perception of natural science; he mentions secrets which are disclosed only to the eye of the physicist and chemist; but where would natural science be without industry and commerce? (1975–2005: 5.40)

You can note how quickly Marx and Engels revert to time here, “a few centuries ago” (above), “a hundred years ago,” “in the time of,” but that’s okay, because they simply wish to say that without “industry and commerce” there would really be no “natural science.” So goes the story of history. But there’s

a spatialization here as well in the way a place *is* all of these times at once *as praxes*, as human work, human *forces* of production and the modes of production that activate them, that are recessed into a “landscape” flattened by the picturesque gaze but still available to philosophical reflection. Where there were “rooms” there are “factories and machines,” which came here because there was already a site where there were “rooms.” This is a good place to do business, as it were—perfect for development, attractive to developers! And this how the forces of inertia can, again, be gravitational in a different sense.

We are thus called to see synchronically and know space dialectically as the subsistence of difference within identity, as the site where a collection of praxes, past and present, co-exist, as inertial forces activated when we work on them. To see synchronically is to resist the urge to see through things, to walk over things with inattention, to naturalize things in the act of using them. It is not to see things “as they are,” which implies presentism and a refusal to think beyond saying “it is what it is,” “things are as they are.” It is, rather, to unsee. It is to take the negative image of our built environment, such that buildings go from foreground to background, appearing “in the way” of the terrain, unnatural, emerging as excrescences or impediments plopped down from the sky; it’s when the road on which you travel appears as a cut in the terrain, an overlay “foisted upon the social landscape by a *deus ex machina*,” as Fanon says, rather than a hypnotizing expanse unfolding in front of you from the horizon like an arcade video game.¹⁷ It is to see “the surround” from the surround itself, rather than from the “false image” of center, from the fort, from the occupation, from the city, from the home, from the car.¹⁸ It’s to see two things at once, in the same space—the thing as individuated but whole unto itself, and the thing as an assembly of parts, produced this way rather than that; likewise, it is to behold the thing as a part in a whole, and the whole as a construction or composition of parts. It is, in sum, to attend to the dialectics of space, of seeing and knowing the built environment, that requires the hardest kind of logical contradiction, violating the old laws of identity that are always solved by time and tarrying, and embracing contradiction that we think is unthinkable and indeed impossible. This is my final proposal . . .

The Material Contradiction of the Spatial Dialectic

Lefebvre ([1974] 1991), Soja, and Jameson are the three thinkers who’ve made everyone aware of “the dialectic of space” or the “spatial dialectic” in

the first place. For the sake of advancing their projects, we need Hegel and more Hegel, who can help us attend to the durable material contradictions of our built space—indeed a spatial dialectic that can account for the “paving stone.” Of course, all three thinkers already work closely with Hegel in their formulations of a spatial dialectic, but here I mean a particular emphasis within Hegel himself, at the very founding and foundations of his own dialectic where he recuperates “contradiction” from all the aspersions philosophers up to Kant had thrown its way—in order to say that, yes, “All things are in themselves contradictory” (Hegel 2010: 381). To demonstrate the viability of contradiction in the *Science of Logic*, Hegel makes a crazy claim that, up until his writing, would seem philosophically downright illogical:

External, sensuous motion is itself contradiction’s immediate existence. Something moves, not because now it is here and there at another now, but because in one and the same now it is here and not here; because in this here it is and is not at the same time. One must concede to the dialecticians of old the contradictions which they pointed to in motion; but what follows from them is not that motion is not but that it is rather contradiction as *existent*. (2010: 382)

To say contradiction is *existent* is to say, colloquially, that it is real, concrete, and material. And to say that it is real, you need a version of contradiction that is literally hard to imagine, almost too “heavy” to contemplate, in the way mods once meant the word. At issue here is the strange contradiction that “at the same time” a thing is “here and not here.” This sort of contradiction is contrary to anything Aristotle would propose in his *Metaphysics*, where he asserts the famous principle of non-contradiction: “The most certain of all basic principles that contradictory statements are not at the same time true” (1984: 1.1597; 1011b13–14). In other words, you can’t say “A is B” and “A is not B” with both being true “at the same time”—as Hegel is doing here in saying that A “is here” and A “is not here,” “at the same time.” Hegel is tasking us with a great labor of thought, sloughing off on us this total impossibility, by making time no way to resolve the contradiction—this common idea of waiting around for something to change or go away. Remember, Hegel’s whole aim is to challenge the long held belief that “the *contradictory* cannot . . . be *represented* or *thought*” (2010: 382), and this includes the spatial contradiction of “what is here and not here.” Even an impossibility like this must be *thought*, however jarring it seems. It must be *represented* precisely because we lack the means to do so and need a jolt to invent them, if crisis or *clearing* hasn’t motivated us to do so already.

As if things weren't bewildering enough, Hegel presses on from this abstract spatial contradiction to conceptualize an outright material contradiction pertaining to what can be said to be in place. And in the process he undoes yet another of Aristotle's laws, what we now call the law of identity (or, for fans of Leibniz, the identity of indiscernibles)—as in the *Metaphysics*, “the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject and in the same respect” (1984: 2.1588; 1005b), or, per the *Topics*, “if two contraries are equally liable to occur naturally in a thing, and the thing has been defined through the one, clearly it has not been defined; otherwise there will be more than one definition of the same thing” (1984: 1.254; 151a). In his *Philosophy of Nature*, which is nothing if not a clinic on the capacity of the dialectic to be spatialized and materialized, Hegel writes something very different about how “contraries” can inhere in the “same thing.” He says “that two material parts which formerly persisted as outside each other and which therefore must be conceived as occupying different places, now occupy *one and the same place*. This is the *contradiction*, and it exists here in a material form” (Hegel 1970: 134). For our purposes, it matters less what Hegel is talking about (he's expositing on “elasticity” as the continuity of distinct parts when the whole suffers impact but soon springs back into shape). What matters more is how he talks about it, contra the old principle of non-contradiction in view of the “material form” of contradiction. He's saying that two things *can* “occupy one and the same place,” all without cracking a grin that this is an impossibility we'll just have to accept, never once blinking an eye in confidentially asserting that he's rewriting Zeno's famous paradoxes of motion to speak not of “abstract places, but here material places, material parts” (Hegel 1970: 134).

To think the material contradiction, in all of its *apparent* impossibility, in all the ways it distorts time into simultaneity and produces a spatial dynamic, the motions and tensions of place that aren't reducible to time, is to begin to conceive a spatial dialectic against the grain of commonsense and spontaneous consciousness but especially against the temporal currents of a dialectic that performs not unlike ideology (which was always Adorno's beef). It is, quite simply, to spatialize and materialize contradiction. All of the authors I mention in the foregoing sections attempt to think the impossibility of a spatio-material contradiction. More will need to be said elsewhere, as I plan to do, and more dialectical logics will need to be spatialized (or their spatiality emphasized). But for now we can indicate that a spatial dialectic is what we can develop a sense for, not only because Hegel didn't fully do so but because in the work of our best spatial theorists, our greatest teachers,

this intransigent material contradiction, which is where one grounds a spatial dialectic, is resolved into time, language, and consciousness.

Prima facie, Benjamin's (2003: 462–63) “dialectics at a standstill” would seem most promising as a spatial dialectic in the way it fixes time until we learn that it's about “dialectical images” in dialectical *time*, meaning, “the place where one encounters them is language” (462). We wish to clarify, rather, that language isn't the *only* place; there is also “wreckage” and “debris” (per Benjamin above). More on point is, of course, Sartre's (1991: 320) “anti-dialectic” in the “material field,” which Jameson (1974: 238; 1961: 182, 189; see Sartre 1956: 623) modifies as an “arrested dialectic,” stalled at the “absolute irreducibility . . . of matter.” Here, too, there's a sense of time standing still, but then we lack spatialization. Both thinkers, in other words, call this dialectic “anti-” or “arrested” precisely because, according to classical logic, there can be no (material) contradiction: here, in other words, the encounter between language and matter produces no dialectic but only absolute difference. (I propose it does.) And so we pass from space back to language and consciousness—a move made by Soja (1989: 2, 223) who, on the one hand, takes inspiration from Borges's “millions of acts . . . occupied the same point in space” in order to develop a “postmodern geography,” but who, on the other hand, resolves this Borgesian paradox back into “temporal narrative” (222, 223).

There's no criticism here, which would be ungrateful. We're only talking about—to cite Hegel—what possibilities, or rather new impossibilities, can be “*represented* or *thought*” with the spatial dialectic and its hard, material contradictions.¹⁹ Jameson, more than anyone, is acutely aware of this problem of even trying to think a spatial dialectic: “One does not undertake to summarize or to present a thought mode that does not yet exist” (2009: 67). Readers may remember Jameson prognosticating decades ago in *Postmodernism* that we need to overcome our current conceptual limits to grasp postmodern spatiality: “we ourselves, the human subjects who happen into this new [postmodern] space, have not kept pace with that evolution; there has been a mutation in the object unaccompanied as yet by any equivalent mutation in the subject” (1991: 38–39). The conceptual problem, in other words, is still with us—we've not yet mutated—which is why years later in *Valences of the Dialectic* Jameson carefully and tentatively follows up his previous claim to describe one feature of the “spatial dialectic.” Not exactly the earlier “arrested” form, this “new spatial dialectic” occasions “the suppression of more traditional temporalities” and the rise of “all kinds of new spatial simultaneities” in finance capital (2009: 69, 66; see 1991: 156–58; 1992: 10). It involves, above all, “self-consciousness,” which experiences

“the suppression of time” and a “quasi-spatial enlargement” (2009: 69) alongside “the spatial expansion implicit in the operations of capitalism” (70). While by now you will expect me to observe that Jameson also resolves the spatial dialectic into subjectivity—and that is true—we can see here clearly that time is diminished, suppressed. His work thus lays in place the question we should all be asking: “What is a spatial contradiction . . . ?” (2009: 68). The answer, in part, is that this very spatial contradiction is a material one—recalling that custom in philosophy from antiquity on that the inquiry into space occasions reflections on matter.

Hegel will have to be our way to the spatial dialectic. It’s not only that his major dialectical terms bear spatial significance, with—for example—talk of the shapes (*Gestalten*) of consciousness in “moments” that are at once “elements” (*Elemente*). Nor is it only that architecture is present everywhere in his work and of course is the foundation of his thinking on aesthetics as well the initial problematic of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (above). Those two features would already be enough to think the spatial dialectic with Hegel. Rather, and quite bluntly, Hegel’s spatial dialectic gives meaning to dialectics itself. This is because Hegel, in his logics as well as his *Philosophy of Nature*, constructs a spatial dialectic with a hard material model of contradiction that makes jolting once more the experience of contradiction itself. We’ve lost the feeling for contradiction, frankly, having passed through so many phases of “theory” that, sans dialectics, make difference a synonym for multiplicity. But we can recognize afresh the critical power of contradiction with the spatial dialectic. For one, ideology is not at home in the “material contradiction” at the center of the spatial dialectic, not quite at full strength in a medium that’s not language or a contradiction that isn’t temporal. Furthermore, it’s as if the spatial dialectic wants to be noticed, demanding our attention, for its version of contradiction *presents* itself as off, cracked, whacked, cut, cleared, but never erased or canceled, always raised and registered: this is why our inquiries into the spatial dialectic have to include spatial politics and histories—in sum, sedimented praxes bearing on the present as inertial forces.

If Hegel intended to secure *a place* for error in his philosophy—“Should we not be concerned as to whether this fear of error is not just the error itself?” (1977: 47)—he certainly found one in the spatial dialectic. With its illogics and impossibilities, the material contradiction of the spatial dialectic takes us aback and sets us back, leaving us scrambling to find ways to commit its paradoxes, energies, and inertial forces to images and words. Good thing that contemporary artists, philosophers, physicists, and novelists, are already on it, registering realities about our material present that are, to put it mildly, untimely.

Notes

- 1 Lucretius offers the most accessible example of this practice.
- 2 Everything you want to know about the field of space and literature (or literary geography) can be found in the work of Robert Tally, Jr. Hearty thanks to Julian Rose for his comments on this essay.
- 3 . . . to our three-dimensional minds, that is.
- 4 Here citing the title of René Viénet's film, "La dialectique peut-elle casser des briques?"
- 5 "*Ideology is a 'Representation' of the Imaginary Relationship of Individuals to their Real Conditions of Existence*" (2014: 256).
- 6 Foucault, in his *Birth of the Clinic*, among his other books, has some powerful moments of ideological analysis (see [1963] 2003: 44–45). Foucault doesn't always shrink from the term *ideology*.
- 7 Žižek, for example, remarks that "The function of ideological fantasy is to mask . . . inconsistency" (1989: 142). Jameson, in his *Political Unconscious*, says that "the aesthetic act is itself ideological . . . with the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions" (1981: 62; see 246). Same goes for Jameson's concept of the "ideologeme," which involves "the imaginary resolution of the objective contradictions to which it thus constitutes an active response" (1981: 104; see 103). Macherey (1978: 60) puts it a little differently, holding that ideology is "spontaneous" until it touches art; absorbed into various media, ideology breaks apart into contradiction: "the finished literary work . . . reveals the gaps in ideology." Althusser, whose intellectual DNA is in all of these claims, writes that "it is ultimately the ruling ideology which is realized in the Ideological State Apparatuses, precisely in its contradictions"; "the ideology by which they function is always in fact unified, despite its diversity and its contradictions" (2014: 245; see 219–20). See also Althusser 2005: 89–128 ("Contradiction and Overdetermination: Notes for an Investigation").
- 8 Paul de Man makes a similar point about ideology in 1986: 11.
- 9 And so where did he end up? In "aleatory materialism." See Althusser 2006.
- 10 By which example Benjamin reflects on the differences between visual and tactile relations to buildings, with the latter (like Sartre's practico-inert) receding into the background by way of "habit."
- 11 See also his "Pack-Donkey's Way" in *City of Tomorrow*, how a city is formed around the donkey paths, avoids the straight line, is difficult to navigate, and supposedly makes no sense.
- 12 See Marx, "The Financial State of France," in his comment on "Mr. Hausmann" and the "new boulevards and streets" in Paris (1975–2005: 15.502–03); and Engels who, speaking on the Paris Commune, is reported to have said: "Louis Napoleon had made the streets wide that they might be swept with cannon against the workpeople but now it was in their favor; they would sweep the streets with cannon against the other party" (1975–2005: 22.588). On street clearing, see 1975–2005: 15.454.
- 13 See Hwy 147 in Durham, NC, built over the leveled Hayti District; and University of Georgia's Brumby, Creswell, and Russell Halls over demolished Linnentown; as well as its construction of Baldwin Hall over sacred burial ground.
- 14 Each thing is no ordinary Objekt/object in some abstract epistemology. Each is a "Gegenstand"—a word that brings to mind many synonyms like "Artikel," "Gebilde" (as well as "Gestalt"), and, last but not least "Ware," the word for "commodity."

- 15 This is Michel de Certeau's phrase from his chapter, "Walking in the City," in which
the skyscrapers of Manhattan are called the "tallest letters in the world" (1984: 91).
- 16 The question of production, along with construction, is the missing piece here to be
discussed in the fuller, forthcoming version of this work.
- 17 Cf. Heidegger, who takes the positive image of a bridge (in Heidelberg?), which "allows
the simple onefold of earth and sky, of divinities and mortals, to enter into a site by
arranging the site into spaces. . . . The location *admits* the fourfold and it *installs* the
fourfold" (1971: 158).
- 18 I'm expanding here on Fred Moten and Stephano Harney (2013: 17): "the false image is
what emerges when a critique of militarised life is predicated on the forgetting of the
life that surrounds it. The fort really was surrounded, is besieged by what still sur-
rounds it, the common beyond and beneath—before and before—enclosure."
- 19 For Foucault (1986: 23, 25), heterotopic "sites . . . are irreducible to one another and
absolutely not superimposable on one another," but they are "capable of juxtaposing in
a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible."

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