

Afterword for New Edition (September 2023)

This book was completed in April, 2003, on the week that the US invaded Iraq. That date marks the end of an age, in terms of special-effects culture. Afterwards, most of all since 2008, media illusion has crept far beyond Vegas-styled architecture and entertainment. Special effects directly invaded our politics, especially poisoning America's elections, even its constitution. Across the internet, the charm of the lie—hoaxes, Artifice, Electronic Baroque—acts like a political death ray, not simply at MAGA rallies.

And in recent years, critics also worry about AI replacing cognition itself, as if we had already become AI. Parts of our daily life are freezing, as if preparing for a new ice age. As an ironic partner to this nihilism, since 2003, a new style of Baroque Artifice has thrown us into a violent style of interregnum, a kind of theatricalized Thirty Years War that is displacing tens of millions of people, killing those who don't flee.

At the same time in America at least, liberal elites and the public remain in drift. This stillness troubles me the most. It is a kind of anxious hibernation, doomsday as a special effect, a scripted space loaded down with premonition, but very little solidarity. The nineties post-Cold War enthusiasms are long since gone. The tangibility of our artificial daily life has become noisier. In Asia and Africa, the droning of drones feels like an invasion from Mars. A mindless aerial bombardment of civilians accompanies a land war that gradually extends from the Ukraine and Central Asia, to Israel, and the Mediterranean. Media illusions become ever more essential to doing business. If I were writing this book now, I would have to sharpen these point considerably; but still maintain the perverse whimsy of special effects.

Then there is a geographical shift. Special effects flourish outside the West, in the emirates, in East Asia. That brings us closer to where global politics is heading, neither east nor west in the old-fashioned hegemonic way. That

means building a template that includes the genealogy of special effects in the Mediterranean, in Middle Eastern worlds; and in China, India, Japan.

Globalization is quite different today than it was in 2003. It has mostly, even literally, run out of gas. We examine 2020 as capitalism changing its script. Thousands of container ships fell into nearly suicidal bottlenecks. Global capitalism shows almost no default mechanisms, no way to confront surprises. The path of those container ships was relentless more than efficient. Then we jump to 2023. The end of the pandemic did not entirely remove these bottlenecks. They sparked a worldwide inflation instead; and recessions in Europe. Shortages have also spiraled into a worldwide real estate crisis. This economic heart attack then inspired Putin to jump into Ukraine. He noticed a scattered confusion left by covid; and thus intensified his blind slaughter of innocents.

A new stage is obviously coming. Special effects will reflect its steady arrival, over the next few decades. This stage no longer privileges the western hegemony featured in this book. But what lies at the center instead? Special effects will have to fit into a planet that is more like a subaltern archipelago instead of a singular or bipolar story. Political constitutions are literally fracturing out like an equation in quantum physics.

That was definitely not so in 2003, not yet—even after 9/11 further shattered western confidence. Globalization was still worshipped. The Vegas nineties still kept shining, like the peace dividend after the Cold War. Not so twenty years later. 2003 globalization looks stitched together now, seems to be falling to pieces. Quite possibly, the land war from the Ukraine may spread to the Mediterranean. All this will amplify how unreliable global shipping lanes have become. Many trade arrangements will undoubtedly fall apart. A new wave of deeply authoritarian governments, like something out of the Baroque seventeenth century, will suddenly appear. Political chaos turns into a self-loathing nativism, an intransigent, rather insane business model. Thus will globalism Stage One wither away. This dissolve only showed initial cracks in 2003. The shockwaves would start five years later, in 2008; and surely will continue into 2050. We now understand how fragile the global chain of distribution actually is. This capitalist metaphysics is, in fact, nothing more than a patchwork. As globalization changes course, tightens and shrinks, the Electronic Baroque will grow more reactionary as well.

To repeat, the clues were already present in 2003, but were not as manifest as they are today. In the summer of 2003, western imperialism was still flaming out. The tragedy in Iraq, truly collapsed into gristly jokes, about America's ineptitude. The globalist high point was moving beyond its Vegas style for

scripted spaces. Now, entire cities and harbors were rescripted. Theming took charge of cryptocurrencies and of Wall Street itself. A pax tecum for consumers was gone; dreams of democracies for shopping replaced by kleptocrats and oligarchs. The new tourist theming seems to echo tax havens and sovereign debts, has taken on a desperation not as clear in the nineties.

The year 2008 was the watershed for all this. The Crash of 2008 deepened the capitalist use of illusion. Cultural anguish naturally followed—the age of the precariat—an age of both disbelief and evangelical frenzy. That schizoid condition then spilled rapidly into politics across the US, Europe, Russia, China, India.

This was bound to happen. Special effects have been propping up financial industries and Wall Street from the seventies on. If *The Vatican to Vegas* were written today, it would emphasize more of that. There might be a chapter on derivative bonds, tax havens, surveillance and pyramid schemes. It would then have to review CSI since 1973 as a business coverup as well. In the eighties, I noticed a growing, unsteady misalliance between the state and capitalism, sponsored by media tricks—the Electronic Baroque. Now that misalliance is farther along, more like a hollowing out of the state itself. We have seen this head on since the elections in the US in 2010, after 2008. Now special effects have to make gridlock and mounting rage look normal.

After the election of Trump in 2016, Vegas seemed a leftover from a lost century. Now Vegas suggests the future of casino capitalism everywhere. Our social contract is undergoing skin erosion on the outside, while hollowing out on the inside.

The public has responded mostly by drifting into itself, in a desperate almost juvenile attempt to catch a breath. That makes our special effects more crazily intimate than in 2003, more about identity under threat.

The pandemic of 2020–2022 intensified the worst economic facts—growing inequality. The anxiety that this produces has sped up America's constitutional crisis. That made special effects theory very topical—a migratory target. We have to reframe terms like scripted spaces, social imaginary, *imago*; urban histories of forgetting. Below are excerpts (more like snatches) from lectures, articles, catalog essays, where I began to sense what these expanded possibilities might include. Meanwhile, this book has also appeared in art exhibitions, and critical writing by various scholars. The scripted spaces concept has influenced artists and architects. But all that is for others to discuss.

The excerpts from my writings since 2003 tell me one thing at least: they suggest a more internalized version of scripted spaces, more about materiality

and immateriality merging; and scripted spaces as ethnographic, about contested identities.

I also have written a lot about scripted spaces in cities after 2003. The centrality of Las Vegas in special-effects discourse has been replaced by mutations in thirty other cities, and thirty other regions (i.e. Dubai). As planning, these new special effects are meant to shield these cities from unstable national politics, toward a kind of hibernation. Urban planning uses illusion to hide from a new Counter Reformation. The result has been more artifice, and more suburb tropes added to inner cities. Beyond the skyline, we find an archipelago of little bourgeois townships; where growing poverty is camouflaged.

A last point: As for the post 2003 role of the internet, digital illusions are now our oxygen. All things are data bytes somehow. And out of all this metalogic, a new universe will take shape, with or without our approval. It will be exhausting and exhaustive. I refuse to give up hope.

Excerpts

Cable News Becomes Reverse Imperialism (2017)

We look at 1968 to 2003, at least as masque (Electronic Baroque). What simple and obvious transitions do these public masques suggest, as of 2017? The democratizing presence of agitprop antics will continue, especially around matters of racism, and police abuse. Leftist rallies may occasionally operate as in the Twenties or the Sixties—as socialist mass theater speaking to power. But on a national scale, agit-prop has gone brownshirt, very-authoritarian. White supremacist (Baroque) masques dominate the news cycle. By that I mean Fox News as masque, as well as online social networks; in monumental defense of “white” hierarchies and conservative politesse. Those are theocratic special effects; they resemble 1640 as much as 2017. The Game of Thrones metaphors certainly point to a nation split horizontally. The echo chamber across politics and media vaguely reminds me of civil wars in the making during the early modern period. Old alliances are melting, as they did when Louis XIV was a baby, while Mazarin tried to unify the civil war France for its future king.

Cable news tends to reinforce a scripted illusion promising Trumpian absolutism in the making. On liberal news, like MSNBC, various pundits dedicate hours of programming to show how national and global markets must stop this absolutist tendency. By comparison, there is almost no coverage of cities

and states, barely even of international news. Hosts interview corporate CEOs as the Baroque princes in the midst of a Thirty Years War. Almost nothing is heard from national and local unions, or from wage earners; they are classified as “special interests,” nuisance makers getting in the way of global markets and suburban infeudation. In recent decades, Americans have (mal)adjusted to an intensely unequal class structure. They grumpily adjust to vanishing pensions, to a world without public support for declining hospitals and schools.

Certainly, my students talk almost obsessively about the shrinking middle class, about real estate apartheid taking over the Manhattan art world (and practically every major city), about the fiscal bankruptcy of almost every state budget—and their lives. They assume that oversight by the federal government—against this corruption—has all but disappeared. The shadow of Homeland Security appears to be depressing oversight; and replaced it with another illusionistic Cold War, this one against fundamentalism.

In talks, lately, I have called this process reverse imperialism. The United States is being colonized by its own economy (a faint but scary resemblance to the chaos that undermined nations during the Thirty Years’ War, 1618–1648). In effect, Trump punishes the state of California as a foreign country, a runaway. Constitutional relationships between states keep growing ever more balkanized. Interstate planning is now at a standstill. Rivers, dams, roads, health care are increasingly being ignored, as the balkanization grows. Every night on talk news shows, the mood of gloom keeps people tuned in. And there is plenty of gloom to go round; but surely that is not the point. Overcoming disaster is the point. I recently learned that thirty percent of Americans no longer believe in constitutional restraints to presidential power. These masques offer a future based on unstoppable post-traumatic, post-apocalyptic unease. The developed world takes for granted that entropy is permanent, because the future keeps aging faster than the present.

The Baroque Folds of Microdata (2017)

For decades now, Baroque illusionism has supported transnational power under the cloak of entertainment, particularly on the Internet, and through digital banking. These folds of micro-data have damaged government. I see near bankruptcy at almost every statehouse; and underneath all of it, an agonized class structure. Finally, our cultural civil war welcomes a newly inept president, a schizophrenic kleptocrat. The nineties software honeymoon has shipwrecked. Still, what follows may not turn out as darkly obvious as Comenius’s

world during the Thirty Years' War, but then again, is that thirty years in Web time?

Digital capitalism has intensified how labyrinths manipulate our politics. Many nineties novels and films warned us that this was coming—fables about blurring matrixes and snowcrashes.

A Lab'rinth wild obscure, to lose one's sense, A *Wilderness* of thick Imper-
tinence.

—Jane Barker (1723)

Happy Surveillance (How does the analytics of illusion work?) (2018)

Digital surveillance is designed very much like the collusion in a scripted space. I realize one could also compare it to a digital panopticon, where the prisoners collude with the jailors. Eyes atop the guard tower are like the Eye at the center of a dome. They watch very openly, not hidden away by the FBI. It is Happy Surveillance through Facebook and Twitter. It let us play sneak-thief with invisible friends. Digital creatures peek out from behind the screen, like goblins in oak trees. We smush a tiny face; its drunken icon winks back. However, the wink is not human. Software only pretends to listen to our endless chatter. Happy Surveillance only pretends to listen. Its various apps stand in for God as an alien species—perhaps the Egyptian gods Anubis, Hathor and Bastet. The inhuman cat eyes mesmerize us. Meanwhile, back on Planet Capitalism, hacks, pirates and thieves rely on Happy Surveillance. They know how softheaded we can get. In E.M Forster's famous story from 1909, "The Machine Stops," God (an omniscient alien machine) demands that we confess our sins, then promises not to listen.

Happy surveillance can easily break apart into pluralism and nativist rage. Its users get fidgety, even potentially violent. They turn theocratic, worship repressive kinds of free speech. Everyone plays at being a victim. Varieties of collusion break apart into a thousand subaltern dialects.

Globalized Localism from the screen to the street (2017)

With the erosion of the nation state by global capital, we enter a new special-effects version of the neighborhood street. The hipster shops may embrace a cityscape that is a hundred years old, but the order of the shops resembles intimate places on a computer screen. That screen helps us code the best way to

walk, like personalized dentistry. I was sensing this change just as I was completing *The Vatican to Vegas*. It will take fifty years for its script to fully manifest. But in the meantime, around the street, our constitutional system of government may not survive the wait. By 2030, we will certainly know.

Absence is Presence (2005)

All scripted spaces rely in some way on absence as presence. That is also true of all narrative forms, including religious faith, prayer, sexual foreplay, funerals, even birth (for the mother, and the father). This moment of absence, like a movie dissolve, inspires partial blindness. A newborn slowly opens its eyes, but at first can't see more than shadows.

Absence inspires regret. Going through the news this morning, I read about military personnel who regret voting for Bush again, after what they have seen in Iraq. The mystery of seeing their political faith evaporate will have some future "affect." Bush's war remains a blank. Why I don't know. Americans are afraid to narratize their anxieties, like collusion inside a scripted space. They prefer to go forward in partial blindness. American militarism will end very slowly; as a scripted space filled with narrative rituals: the occupation of Baghdad, life in the Green Zone. Mercenary soldiers pretend to relinquish power in the absence of answers. Police forces in American cities are being issued military weapons left over from the occupation of Bagdad. Where can that lead?

Wartime in-depth news is so incomplete. Breaking news is all that remains. Coverage of terrorist acts becomes a replay from earlier wars, as a blank cipher. Anything can be written on it. Terror also stands in for risks in an economy and a political system that is increasingly fragile. The lack of information forces the creation of a scripted space. The war is losing ground (another Vietnam). Policies will get cloudier. Bush and Cheney have nothing to say. The blanks stand in for government pressure to not ask. In a great novel, such absences can be poignant. They are sensed when you turn to a new chapter. The next chapter opens a day after mistakes by the army were made. The downhill military slide in Iraq is slower than Vietnam, will metastasize for another ten or fifteen years. On TV outside the US, a street leveled by airpower takes on a naïve immanence, as displaced people gather aimlessly, a pause before the next "terrorist" war.

How to Mummify a Scripted Space (2015)

Jeremy Bentham was the leading philosopher of Utilitarianism, and inventor of the panopticon. He famously requested that upon his death, his body be put on public display. This came to pass, and his taxidermized remains continue to smile faintly inside a glass display case at University College London. The original death head eventually needed a wax replacement. A genial Madame Tussaud copy of his tanned face still beams underneath his easygoing burial costume: a garden hat, a casual waistcoat and jacket; and a modest walking stick.

Bentham devoted his life to defending the everyday usefulness of science. But his actual death head was poorly mummified—according to a Māori formula. It rapidly shrank down to an apple core. Nevertheless, for over a century, it was respectfully positioned between his legs, inside the case, like a Holbein anamorphic signature. Now it must be scientifically preserved inside its own box.

Indeed, Bentham continues to look blithe and paunchy (pleasantly “engaged in thought”). He sits on a Utilitarian wooden stool. In recent years, a webcam (named Panopticam) has been sewn to his chest, to record the movement of spectators.

Vegas As a Cyberpunk Slum After the Recent Crash (2010)

Are scripted spaces going to become ruins—at the edge of the next Great Depression, which is surely just over the horizon? Increasingly, in the news, Vegas stands in for unreliable foreclosures, as a hideout for unrepentant oligarchs. During the 2008 presidential campaign, Obama mentioned Vegas as a place where oligarchs felt at home.

On December 8, 2008 David Moberg, editor in-chief of *In These Times* wrote: “The casino economy (has) hit home for working families with a vengeance ... The casino economy had its chance, and it crapped out.”

Gambling or risk capital now meant simulated money. A digitized slot machine is meant to escape detection, because it operates at the speed of light. In 2009, in Congress, there was an uproar about finance swindlers. At a hearing with Goldman Sachs, Senator Claire McCaskill said: “You are the house, you’re the bookie...You even bet against investments set up for your clients...Selling short...Gaming the instability, enhancing it.”

How Banks Script Your Money

From 1973 to 2008, banks (with flash drives) ran much of the American economy as a scripted space. The rules were similar to a casino, yet strange. By 1980, collusion had turned into more of a con job. Like a pyramid scheme, the program could cheat (if only by nickels and dimes) almost every player algorithmically. And that included mega corporate and pension investors. Derivative and junk bonds were hidden inside a vast, cloudy noosphere. The operation had so many places for hacking, it ran almost by dead reckoning. The script pooled wealth toward an international magnate class. Thus after 1990, scripted spaces became even more globalized. As soon as the Cold War ended, hundreds of new markets for special effects suddenly appeared.

This trickle-down market was dominated by a ten-thousand-mile supply chain, deemphasizing factories and production. The answer to instabilities was just “pretend.” Convince others that the risk is secure. Risk as a scripted space expanded the consumer-based economy. Production no longer had to be trustworthy. Flamboyance counted for more than stability. Just stay on your toes, because this supply side approach runs blindly until it crashes. All you need to know is when to jump off.

Gold fever came with risk. Gambling with unsafe offshore oil rigs fattened executive bonuses. Unemployment had swelled to ten per cent. As one blurb explained: “Money men turned the system into a slot machine.”

And then, a year later, by November 2010, these attacks on finance almost ceased. Who legally dropped the ball? The sins by bankers to American sovereignty should not have been forgiven. But they were. Always trust the programmer who gives you the game. During election season, voters turned vigilante, but not toward business. Instead, they condemned the Obama government, for regulating at all. They essentially invited the arsonist to live rent free. While the arsonist’s fire raged, they beat upon the fireman (i.e. see Max Frisch’s play *Firebugs*, 1953).

Note 2023: Need I point out crypto currencies, etc. after 2010. I’m sure the reader already thought of that. Bitcoin was just getting started when I wrote this.

Special Effects in the Courtroom and in Money Laundering (2017)

Scripted spaces are usually identified with themed environments. These evolved out of sixties shopping centers, and then dominated the globalist expansion of the NATO economy from 1991 on. But theming also reinforced global money laundering, deeply unstable jobs, and real estate gold fevers. I have always considered scripted illusion a narrative about power, but now I realize that it is also *ancien* (or *antigua* in Spanish, same meaning), a desire to become antique, a ruin in the making, the last of the breed, etc.

That means scripted spaces have become *memento mori*, dust on the tongue. They are a narrative grammar reinforced by globalism; intensifying the political authority of lies (fictions). We collaborate in the ruin of our infrastructure. This is a weaponizing, a much more naked instrument; far beyond diversions in the movies or on the façade of buildings. It layers and neutralizes. Overlapping authorities disempower the central government. Scripted spaces will make that political labyrinth seem adventurous; but in fact, it leaves national politics in peril, enhances a trend that I call urban industrial feudalism. This is not feudal as a system; it is feudal as a parasite, as an unsteady partner wrapping its many legs around the state. As a result, the one percent slowly acquire the divine right to evade government altogether. Tax revenues grow ever more unstable. Gradually, the US evolves a pawn of global investment; essentially turns into a colony of itself.

Thus, scripted spaces help to subvert justice as if in the courts. For example, we are impaneled to sit as jurors in a murder trial. A young man with gang insignia tattooed on his neck is accused of shooting down a girl. There just happens to be almost no physical evidence—mostly hearsay from police officers. The judge asks the jurors if they accept the principle of “beyond a reasonable doubt”—thus, are still prepared to convict based on hearsay.

In this scripted space, the judge explains, a crime will be simulated by the prosecution, but without absolute proof. Thus, “beyond a reasonable doubt” can still mean “probably guilty.” In violent crimes, there may be only one witness, almost no corroborating evidence. The judge and the prosecuting attorney want to make certain that no juror has qualms about voting guilty based on “hearsay” by witnesses, who were not on the scene.

The trial begins: within this scripted space, each juror takes a picaresque journey. The juror must volunteer, certainly not be forced. But the evidence that she will encounter will be raw (violent, a murder). The truth may seem at first

to be no more than a card trick. But eventually, the cards add up to murder by association. Thus, justice is uncovered.

The judge will guide (advise) the jury, show them how to read between the lines. Therefore, the judge's role is "*objective narrator*," not unlike a novel.

Prosecuting Attorneys serve as authors of a plot (that remains a fiction at first). Eventually, the plot is convincing. Prosecutors traverse the nuances of guilt within blank spaces between, where evidence may not exist.

The defense is the counter-author. It must prove this plot to be unsteady, a fiction.

Thus, all versions of the story are slippery to a degree. They are not irreducibly true or false. However, this uncertain plot has a finality. Once the jury reads the jury's verdict, all doubts—legally speaking—disappear. That is unless challenged to a higher court.

In Latin, *fictio* also meant "legal fiction." In other words, fiction was for Roman law, the best version of truth—a construction of events. Justice had to take certain leaps, if order were to be maintained. Evidence was a kind of clay. That clay was authored (sculpted in law), until it satisfied (or yielded) what actually took place. Thus, justice, in the strictest sense, did not have to be served. Therefore, within a trial, cheating and fictionalizing could be legalized as truth.

Democracies have a more chaste idea of *fictio*. For democracies, the jury's mind remains immaculate; almost metaphysical. That is, of course, until the Supreme Court and Trump's madness sweeps guilt into a dust bin. In the meantime, Americans still believe that jurors have every right to the last true word. Justice may not be poetic—too often not absolutely true; not even cleansing—but it is fundamental.

Note 2023: This was written six years before Trump himself was indicted and tried in four courts at the same time; 91 indictments.

The trial is a scripted space. Its program archives evidence and witnesses. The space between, those shadowy lost moments, must become very clear to the jurors. The construction of the crime must be surgical enough. Questions can be asked along the way. But the program itself is guided by the narrator (the judge) and two authors. The jury chooses one of two adventures.

In that spirit, at least as metaphor, the trial is like Huck going down the river. It is legal fiction, a picaresque that rises above fake news. It is a jumble of ironies that adds up to justice. No wonder that risk capitalism can so easily skate around the rule of law. Like Trump, the casino of profitmaking takes pride in its duplicities. And Trump's "base" loves him for it. That is the law of economic injustice inside the feudal condition.

Globalized Localism Updated (2018)

The nation state is being eroded by global capital. That is hardly a secret. The effect of this erosion is to privilege the rights of localism—as well as a new authoritarian style of nationalism in Europe, Asia and the US. New varieties of scripted streets reenact this subaltern mess. The “old-town” street invisibly transforms into a hipster interface. Our little screens help us code and broker these streets, as we walk. The cityscapes resemble neo-Baroque architectural illusion more than ever. They subsume the urban rust of infrastructure, behind silos of vegan cafes, nostalgic saloons, cutesy boutiques; and in decades to come, more canopy trees. The “hipster” street must be “actual.” Its cityscape dates from no later than 1920, with twisted brick or cobblestones. Residents walk through these historically uneven sidewalks as if through a movie set.

Brick and mortar—even peeled store fronts are sealed with a polymer coating. Petrified ruins are making a comeback. Worn streets become shiny, as if no one had walked on them yet; like a museum shop more than a museum. As I often say, we first became tourists in our own city; and are now tourists in our own body. These historic streets gloss over their memories as evolving slums. They even remove the culture that streets used to provide. Of course, that is inevitable. The crowded newsstands are gone, the chatty bookstores, the raunchy music cafes, the bug house squares and atheneum lecture halls. The sheer orality of streets from 1850 to 1940 has quieted down somehow; whether the street is crowded or not.

The old city is now part of a suburbanized logic. This speaks to more than just streets. Guessing how much more is quite a puzzle. At the risk of oversimplifying, let us say that the simulacrum (the startups and tiny candle stores) is no longer a copy without an original. That was already true in the eighties. Since then, the copy on the storefront is itself the original. We have finally entered a new civilization of Baroque Artifice. We drift past a 1940’s bowling alley, a 1920’s barber shop, a bar inside an old five and ten. Everywhere, a coat of old paint seals the patina as if in amber; along with naked support beams. Who said noir isn’t cute as a bug? A restored neon sign reads “the coldest beer in town.” Indeed, on this street, preservation is simply the original. But its *more than authenticity* is overcoded—self-consciously artificial, packaged in straw like bottles in a wine cellar. It is made to look as if no one has moved in yet.

We have entered a very different bourgeois script for inhabiting cities. Clearly, economic shocks could make a joke of this script. However, it will take

fifty years for that joke to fully manifest. In the meantime, our constitutional system—everything that ties cities to the nation—may not survive the wait. Before 2030, as early as that, we will certainly know.

Vegas (2011)

After the crash of 2008, many suburbs in the US essentially died. Lake Las Vegas, a wealthy new township seventeen miles from the Strip became a suburban ruin. Only Phase One, 1,600 of its 9,000 units were completed. Investors in Phase II were duped of at least \$150 million dollars. The brand-new casino (MonteLago) had to be closed, along with two luxury hotels, a huge lake and marina. For two years, bankruptcies were the only business activity.

By the summer of 2010, the scene was breathtaking. With temperatures at 110, desert haze revealed mountains scaled far back. There was nothing close by, only the Strip. On blank cul de sacs, hundreds of detached homes were scattered, as if due to the black death, or an invasion by Aztecs. After the Crash, practically everyone had been forced to leave in a hurry, almost before the paint dried.

Many structures remained only half built, like movie sets, with lumber stacked, and bare frames. No signs of decay were evident yet. The landscaping was still being maintained, in case a financial sunrise returned one morning (if the bank finally allowed money to come back).

Occasionally, a lonely but fancy car was parked, usually a Beamer, just one per each block. Someone apparently hadn't been able to escape in time, or was still able to pay the mortgage.

By 2009 (three months after the Crash), half the real estate in Clark County was "under water," was in debt more than the property was worth. As of 2011, Nevada has the highest unemployment (over 14 percent), and the highest foreclosure rate in the United States.

This reversal of fortunes tells us so much about where the United States is heading, and where Americans once imagined they were. However, we must *not* identify these scenarios as cyberpunk or even ominous. The problem is more about adaptation: Somehow, people in the US will reinvent how narrative is written (in print, in film, online); and how politics evolves.

Considering that the US was the largest economic kingdom (not empire) in the history of our species, these points of impact are still rather pale. Transitions this grand usually require a world war to complete, something like a full eclipse. The Crash of 2008 was, in fact, no larger than the Crash of 1987. By

the same logic, I suppose, the Crash of 1929 was not as overwhelming as myths suggest. The real drop took literally two years, by 1932. Economists tell us that the Depression was more the result of trade wars, worldwide attrition, and the refusal by the Hoover Administration to loosen capital.

Pre-code Hollywood films offer clues that may help. The Great Depression on film took three years to start. Until 1933, most Hollywood movies (and most novels and newspaper coverage) were still about encountering the 1929 Crash; as a victim or by finding a way to recover, to get rich all over again. Then in 1933, those fables and bible tales ended: Depression culture arrived, particularly from Hollywood. In the classic trope, *Golddiggers of 1933* opens with Ginger Rogers in a peek-a-boo outfit, wearing huge silver dollars, singing “We’re in the Money.”

If there is a three-year lapse time between crash and depression—and perhaps our depression will be unique, different from the past century, then there must be clues in 2012.

Scripted Cruise Ships Close to Shore (2017)

We take a charter gambling cruise from Catalina Island (off Los Angeles) to Baja in Mexico, a short hop really. The dealers are often international, foreigners who are highly mobile themselves. Many are trying to raise some cash to take home, because money is short everywhere. They are like sailors in 1840 circling the Horn, but in this case, the sailors never really set to sea. The rules on these cruise ships are looser than Vegas, and cheaper—lower stakes, simpler fare. Disney Cruise Line has two ships in its flotilla: they offer bingo instead of gambling, to protect the Disney brand.

(Of course, in Las Vegas itself—and in Disneyland—the proletarian amusement-park style is also back, much cheaper funkier.) At the MGM Grand, in a plush spot, a banner offers everyone a second bottle of liquor free—next to racks of tee shirts one might find on the funky Venice Boardwalk. But who gambles when they’re that drunk? At New York/New York, I see cheap candy for sale, like the Coney Island boardwalk of my childhood. On a poster, a showgirl dressed as Marie Antoinette says: “Let them eat candy.”

White Noise as Special Effects (2017)

Globalization has pluralized the world more than globalized it. It has fractured industrial coastlines into a late medieval archipelago. Coastal metropolises now operate as independent city states, like New York, London, Hong Kong, Los Angeles Rotterdam/Amsterdam, Tokyo, Singapore, Dubai, and Seoul. Within these city states are urban laboratories: little ribbon districts about four blocks long, scripted spaces in gentrified hipster neighborhoods.

These ribbons operate by a nano script: They are non-centered like white noise; like intelligent particulates floating inside a gas. Or black data with no bottom.

Imagine a constitutional crisis creating granular urban isotopes. Trump's incoherent, sociopathic presidency is adding even more broken fragment; more economic and social inequality. Master planning from Washington has been fading since the eighties; this has spawned a rapidly growing regionalization—and a violent grievance culture. Thus, these re-newed city states are infeudating themselves, turning into three separate kingdoms in the US.

So too in the UK, we have London trapped between continents after Brexit. In Germany, a vastly weakened central party fights to hold on. In Spain, there are renewed threats of secession by Catalonia; in France the failure to come up with a popular movement to address their postcolonial crises.

There were also presidential embarrassments in Brazil, and for a year, in Korea, but they arrested and removed their Trump. Somehow, we have entered an age of too many kleptocrats, from Russia to Washington DC. Granularity is a better word than pluralism here. The sandy bottom encourages tax havens, an invitation to steal.

This pluralism also blurs the line between fact and fiction—the *imago* or collective mental picture. Facts on the news are dissolving more rapidly every week. Political folklore is exploding.

Like flags with skull and crossbones, this ship of un-state features black data and runaway surveillance. Everywhere, I see initiation rites for new kinds of pirates and vigilantes. Rightwing news loves Artifice, has a theocratic desire to be lied to. Everywhere, one is struck by a faked metaphysics, a speculative escapism. This reinforces white nativists, vigilantes, runaway populism, grievance culture.

I am reminded of a quote from historian Margo Bistis about the utopian philosophies of 1900, especially pragmatism from William James. She writes: "What is left of the future, and how might we use its tattered conceptual re-

mains—remnants as I call them—to fend off the feudal abyss of the neoliberal Global Order?"

The Baroque immersions in America during the eighties and nineties, so much a part of *The Vatican to Vegas*, tell us that themed spaces were a solvent dissolving national policies. New dialects of this disaster has since found their way to the Emirates, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Mumbai, even Teheran. Authoritarian governments rely on pluralism, but will be undone by it, in the end.

Los Angeles has been thoroughly redesigned structurally by this post-Cold War, since 1997 (after a vast recession in 1992–1995). Southern California is now an arterial economy isolated from the federal government. Its networks grew along a supply chain from its harbors. It is increasingly a crossroads city, an integrated region of eighteen million people; linked (hardwired) to three continents—ethnographically, economically and culturally. We have not seen urban Baroque kingdoms on this scale—or as arterial—since the fifteenth century. And there are dozens of them throughout the world—a Hanseatic, sculptural hyperspace.

On the seas, container ships are Baroque white noise. Carrying ten thousand containers, the ships unload at ports, while hiding their dehumanizing effect. They particularly erase labor and political interferences. What in the 1990s looked more like the adventure of Flow (of branches instead of boundaries) has evolved into a fragile scripted space. Will these sociopathic ships “care” if the nation collapsed? Those who program them have no interest in setting up defaults for emergencies. What will the trigger be, that spins this lack of preparedness into collapse?

More Baroque (2018)

While I speak of the Baroque as a contemporary phenomenon, I also mean its ancestors, like flora in its stomach. A DNA that persists even today flourished during the centuries when feudalistic pluralism was at its peak in Europe: 1600–1780. Like bloodied prize fighters, there were two dangerous factions that were also sometimes partners—the mercantilist bourgeoisie as both friendly vassals and sworn enemies of old feudal monarchies. Both of them battled against a common obstruction, the feudal nobility, who wanted to dissolve the state. What resulted, amidst countless, gruesome disasters, was an unsteady alliance between merchants and the crown. This alliance created endless frictions. And from this friction, there emerged architectural noise. We see it in Baroque palaces—intricately suggested by the flamboyant stucco and layers of

domed illusion. The raw deal is even more apparent in Baroque theater design, so *raffiné*, but thoroughly corrupted by noise, perhaps from a disdainful aristocrat, seated in a box directly onstage. Then came the thrum of expensive effects. What does this noisy immersive Baroque setting tell us—then and now—this flutter of special effects, in 1650 very nautical, like sails in a shipwreck, throw-away details in the corners and underneath, overhead. The noise is filled with morbid and comical, but expert, uses of Renaissance business software (mathematical and nautical perspective), but on behalf—in promotion of the king. Neither side trusted the other, any more than global capital trusts the nation state today.

There lies the heart of the Baroque, then and now. Baroque special effects are architecture within that subjunctive tense. In the Baroque period, these effects spoke to unsteady alliances between capital and the state. Their tonality was corrupted by spectacular noise (that unsteady alliance). Baroque storytelling, then and now, is always filled with the folds made by evasions, secrets, and political scoundrels.

The New “Baroque” is a Long Durée (2015)

We live in a state of permanent feudalistic disorientation, enhanced by derivative financing; by investments that hyper leverage special-effects money; by flash trading. It is fair to say that so much data is on clouds, the needle itself has become a haystack. With all these island stacks of data, a rapid degeneration of the state cannot fail to continue, like boring holes through government. We respond as they did in Baroque eras—we adapt through very unsteady alliances. For example, in response to encroaching chaos, urban life has gone more local than its cosmopolitan façade suggests; into feudalistic hipster towns within a Baroque urban core; like tariff gates along a road to a Hansa city in 1600. Each tariff ribbon is about five blocks long; each brief ribbon is an offshoot of uptown mega-wealthy freeport zones, where all forms of piracy are commodified.

Hipster townships pretend to survive in a farmer’s market version of the craft economy, presumably below the radar. But in fact, the radar is mostly about “happy” consumer surveillance inside a gig economy. Meanwhile, across the US, from town to suburb, a scripted space as cultural dissolve has practically eradicated (subsumed) many older forms of art and literature, certainly journalism. Of course, this is undoubtedly another historical stage—like the one that preceded the Baroque. A quasi-feudal interregnum persisted for 175

years, after the Black Death pandemic; until the great blowup truly began, after 1516 (the Reformation wars).

Updated notes on “The Screen” (orig. 1983, updated in 2019 and 2022)

The computer screen is scripted space in generally flat multiple-layers. It is like sixties animation optically printed, with tectonic pulses announcing themselves. However, a million ant farms somehow coexist underneath this abstracted computer screen; privatized, yet very much in public. The interface on the screen itself operates as a scripted two-way mirror. It watches us, as in analytics, Happy Surveillance and AI. The mirrored surface itself is rather formalized, in an evening suit, but also a bit naughty, like window peeping—while looking shy and polite, like the folding screen for undressing in 1900. We feel ourselves being intuitively handled; we act like a voyeur inviting voyeurism. In other words, the tactility of the screen is still analog, because we sense our body invaded, as if by fingers. The touch of data upon us feels as tangible as clothing, as powerful as drones on a bombing run. We often try to cover up our spectral nakedness—screen off more of ourselves each year, to protect against hackers. We are endlessly on the defensive, but must pretend that we are masters of the scripted program. Immersive spaces that are engendered by data remain as oddly sculptural as cryptocurrency. However, this Vegas-like faux money will disappear like a night of heavy drinking at a bar.

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