Critical Distance:
Walter Benjamin's Pathos of Nearness and London's Building Boom

by Günter Gassner

How can we critically engage with capitalism in the 'urban age,' at a time when more and more people live in cities? How can we do so with regard to the built environment of a global city? I distinguish between two different approaches. The first starts from contradictions of capitalism such as the juxtaposition of overabundance and poverty and examines the ways in which these are represented in the cityscape. The second starts from a detailed exploration of practices of city making in order to explore the multiple different and often unexpected ways in which capitalist economies are justified and embedded in texts and images that are deemed to be socially meaningful. In other words, the first develops a critique of the capitalist city; the second allows a critique of capitalism through the city. These two approaches interrelate and overlap. However, their claims and scopes are not the same. Both have unique starting points and different directions of critique.

In this essay I discuss these two approaches with regard to London's current tall building boom. At the time of writing, approximately 400 skyscrapers are in the planning stage or under construction in the city. Between fifty and eighty of them are towers that will be built by private developers not exclusively but to a large extent for industries that are pivotal for financial capitalism: banks, insurance and real estate companies as well as globally operating business service firms. These buildings are amongst the most visible manifestations of finance capital. Several of them are located in the City of London, which is London's historical core as well as a commercial center of Greater London. This essay, then, explores the relationship between history and financial capitalism or, better, the ways in which historiographical approaches are related to a critical engagement with urban processes under financialized capitalism.[1] Put differently, I examine the ways in which urban historians criticize the visual impact of office towers on the historic built environment.

London's tall building boom is a peculiar manifestation of what David Harvey terms 'capitalist urbanization,' i.e. urbanization's "particularly active role […] in absorbing the surplus product that capitalist are perpetually producing in their search for surplus value."[2] His analysis shows that the urban built environment has been the terrain of continued reinvestment for a long time. There is a reciprocal acceleration between cityscapes and capitalism. A critique of capitalism in the 'urban age' must be understood along these lines. Urbanization requires and propels capitalism and its consequences are in no way limited to urbanized areas. The visual transformation that central London currently undergoes shows parallels to that of New York City more than one hundred years ago, when office towers started to replace churches and governmental buildings as the tallest buildings in the city. The crucial question, however, is: what is the nature of *current* political negotiations that produce this

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[1] Louis Moreno, "The urban process under financialised capitalism," *CITY* 18(3) (2014).

[2] David Harvey, "The Right to the City," *New Left Review* 53 (2008): 25.

transformation? And how can we intervene in these negotiations?

In the last few years I have spent some time analyzing the ways in which architects, planners and urban historians conceptualize London's cityscape. I conducted semi-structured interviews with different actors who are involved in planning processes. I studied official planning documents for commercial skyscrapers in the City of London, including those for the so-called 'Heron Tower' and the 'Pinnacle.' I explored Design Statements – documents in which architects explain the rationale of their design – and Environmental Statements and Townscape and Visual Assessments – documents in which design experts, including a townscape consultant, assess the visual impact of a proposed development on prominent buildings and historic sites of the city. I studied reports by Historic England, which is a non-governmental body that advises planning authorities in planning processes. In addition, I also attended 'public inquiries,' which are cross-examinations of different actors who are involved in planning processes after a planning decision has been 'called in' by the Secretary of State.

What became evident in my analyses is the important role of specific representations of the city's past in political negotiations about the city's future. The tallest buildings in central London were once churches and governmental buildings. Now they are occupied by financial and business service industries. However, transnational capital flows and private strategies of profit maximization do not necessarily generate generic cityscapes. The constant search for investment is combined with a quest for a unique visual appearance. With the aim to attract global investment and to stand out in the network of global cities, it is often a local history to which professionals give particular importance. London is a prime example of this phenomenon, which is why I regard the work of urban historians as particularly important for a critical engagement with the financialized city.

Historians who work for Historic England advise local authorities in questions regarding the historic built environment. In the last fifteen years it was them who criticized the tall building boom in London most consistently. It was due to Historic England's appeal against granted planning permissions that the Secretary of State called in planning decisions for further investigation. At the same time, Historic England lost all public inquiries. This is one of the reasons why historians' criticism of commercial skyscrapers needs to be re-examined. My aim in this essay is to develop a critique of their critique and to use this double-critique to open up a debate about financial capitalism more generally.

Harvey insists that the control over production and utilization of surplus capital needs to be democratized rather than left in the hands of the few.[3] Such a democratization, I argue, can do with – and, indeed, is reliant on – a critical engagement with what we see when we look at the city. This does not mean that social and economic relationships can be easily read off the cityscape. However, the visual city is a useful starting point for scrutinizing financial capitalism. To put it differently, when visual strategies are currently being used in support of the financialization of the city then the city's visual appearance can and should equally be used to critically engage with this process.

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[3] Harvey, "Right to the City," 37.

Aesthetic and Political Validity

Walter Benjamin's account of the relationship between aesthetics and politics in "The Author as Producer" is important inasmuch as it develops a conceptual framework that relates to my distinction between a critique of the capitalist city and a critique of capitalism through the city. As we shall see, it also allows us to critically reflect on the role of historians in political negotiations of the city. Benjamin wrote this piece for a talk he aimed to give at the Institute of Fascism in 1934. One of the main arguments in this text is that rather than commenting on a political system, artists should rather be concerned with the correct positioning of the artwork within the socio-economic system. Political art, for Benjamin, is not defined by a viewpoint on politics but on a 'correct' political *standpoint*, which is one that contributes to the re-organization of society.

For Benjamin, the correct political standpoint is on the side of the proletariat, which is why the artist has to give up her/his autonomy in order to become "useful for the proletariat in the class struggle".[4] This is an important point because politics, as he suggests with regard to Fascism, becomes aestheticized when the masses can express themselves without, however, being granted rights "to change property relations".[5] For him, "aestheticizing political life" does not mean that artistic expression and political agency are divorced. It means that the former works against the latter: the masses experience their "own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure".[6] This is where Benjamin sees potential for the artist to intervene. Crucially, political commentary, he argues, is not only insufficient – even if it is a correct comment – but it can also be counterproductive. A "political tendency, however revolutionary it may seem," he writes, "has a counterrevolutionary function so long as the writer feels his solidarity with the proletariat only in his attitudes, not as a producer."[7] Benjamin alleges that the artist must be a worker, a producer. She/he must produce the correct "*technique*" for the work to have an "organizing function" or, better, as mentioned above, a re-organizing function.[8]

The artist needs to "re-function" the techniques of artistic production from values of the bourgeois market place into "revolutionary use value."[9] As long as she/he operates within bourgeois categories, the work does not provide ammunition in the class struggle and becomes, more than anything else, another commodity for the entertainment industry. For Benjamin, this is a form of "left-wing melancholy"[10] and the corresponding

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[4] Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2, 1931–1934*, eds Michael W. Jennings, Gary Smith and Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005): 768.

[5] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938–1940*, eds Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006): 270.

[6] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility," 270.

[7] Benjamin, "Author as Producer," 772.

[8] Ibid.: 770 and 777.

[9] Ibid.: 775; see also Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* (New York: The Free Press, 1979): 143.

[10] Walter Benjamin, "Left-Wing Melancholy," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2, 1931–1934*, eds Michael W. Jennings, Gary Smith and Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005): 423.

artists are "left-wing intellectuals."[11] These are the artists who have the correct viewpoint but the incorrect standpoint; they convey the correct political message but stand outside the relations of production. The artwork needs to be positioned *within* the relations of production.[12] Only then it has the power to turn "consumers [...] into producers" and "readers or spectators into collaborators."[13]

What techniques free the means of production and, in so doing, serve the class struggle? Benjamin mentions the surrealist montage, in which pieces are decontextualized and juxtaposed with other, seemingly incongruous pieces. For him, the montage is a "political instrument" because it intervenes in the established order as the "superimposed element disrupts the context in which it is inserted."[14] Another technique is the 'distancing effect' that is used in the Epic Theater. The Epic Theatre, Benjamin emphasizes, is less concerned with filling the public with feelings than with alienating it through thinking from the conditions in which it lives.[15] Rather than bringing a situation closer to the spectator, the spectator is being distanced from it. Being too familiar with a place, too close to and too immersed in a situation can become a "breeding ground for asocial behavior."[16]

What is the relevance of Benjamin's conceptual repertoire for urban historians who are involved in the planning process of commercial skyscrapers? First of all, I want to suggest that historians can be likened to producing artists in this context or, at least, that they are co-designers of the built environment. Representatives of Historic England not only advise local authorities in planning processes but they are often also involved in the design process from an early stage on. Together with architects and building and planning consultants they design the cityscape with the important difference that they are not employed and paid by private developers but the public sector. Drawing on Benjamin's account of political and aesthetic validity, historians, I suggest, should not comment on financial capitalism but they should position their work within financial capitalism. If they want to develop a useful critique of London's tall building boom, then they must develop adequate techniques, i.e. appropriate historiographical approaches.

The transformation of London's cityscape is currently heavily criticized by several design-related professionals including architects, artists and historians who have organized against this transformation under the so-called 'Skyline Campaign' – a campaign that aims to "stop the devastation of devastation of badly designed and poorly placed tall buildings."[17] These professionals criticize the appearance of the cityscape, which, in their view, is the result of a few poor artistic decisions and an insufficient planning framework. I, on other hand, argue for taking on systemic relations of production through the city's appearance. Their critique of the financialization of real estate, in my view, must not start from critical comments on financial capitalism; it must start with an exploration of different historiographical techniques and their relations to urban processes under financialized capitalism. Moreover, rather than

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[11] Benjamin, "Author as Producer," 772.

[12] Ibid.: 770.

[13] Ibid.: 777.

[14] Ibid.: 775 and 778.

[15] Ibid.: 778–9.

[16] Benjamin, "Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility," 267.

[17] See www.skylinecampaign.org.

exploring the visual impact of commercial skyscrapers on the reading of historic monuments, I will argue, they should re-examine the ways in which their own way of representing the city's past has become useful for capitalist urbanization. This way, the wider public can be 'activated' or, in Benjamin's terminology, consumers in the city can be turned into producers of the city. As we shall see, the distancing effect of the Epic Theater points to one of the key problems of current historians: they immerse themselves into the past rather than represent the past in the present.

Distance to the City

I now turn to two concrete instances that showcase this problem. How do current historians conceptualize the transformation of London's cityscape? The Heron Tower is a 230 meters tall office building that is located on Bishopsgate and which was opened in 2012. The Pinnacle is a project that was planned to be the tallest and most iconic office tower in the City of London and whose construction stopped in 2013 after the developers failed to sign a major pre-let agreement. What the two planning processes had in common was an emphasis on visual assessments of the relationship between the proposed building and St Paul's Cathedral in selected "key views" of the city.[18] The view that occupied center stage was the one from Waterloo Bridge towards the City of London. In other words, the multiple different visual relationships between different building types were reduced to the fixed visual relationship between a particular historic sacred building and commercial skyscrapers on 'the London skyline.' Professionals claimed that this particular urban view is highly significant because it represents the wider city. Without a doubt, any critical urban theorist is wary of such a claim and supports Christine Boyer's argument that in the contemporary city the meaning of representational images is eroded and totality is lost.[19] In multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-religious London, each and any fixed and static representation of the city is inadequate. However, it is not merely inadequate. Indeed, representativeness itself is a capitalist category or, better, a category that solidifies the financialization of the city.

What, according to historians, makes the view from Waterloo Bridge representative of the wider city? Because "Waterloo Bridge is on the bend of the river," an historian of Historic England explains, "you can see the City of London looking east and the City of Westminster […] looking west. So, it's a pivotal point to the public sphere in London."[20] It is this viewpoint, he claims, that "provides the best panorama of the City of London where you see the whole of the City and St Paul's more or less in the center of the view."[21] Here, representativeness refers to a long-distance view towards the historic center of the city or, to put it differently, representativeness is the result of an intersection of spatial and temporal distance.

Reading a skyline as a representative representation of the city is not uncommon. The term 'skyline' came into being in the nineteenth century; at a time

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[18] Robert Tavernor, "On the Art of Urban Design," *Designio* (March 2004): 50.
[19] M. Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory: Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).
[20] Interview, Representative of Historic England, 2010.
[21] Interview, Representative of Historic England, 2010.

when some built environments changed so visibly that established concepts appeared to be insufficient to describe it.[22] According to the historians John Burchard and Albert Bush-Brown, the term was coined in the 1890s when New Yorkers were intrigued by the visual transformation of the city that resulted from the construction of office towers.[23] Wayne Attoe suggests that it came into use a decade after the invention of the term 'skyscraper' in Chicago in the 1850s, at a time when citizens and increasingly also immigrants and tourists struggled to make sense of the rapidly expanding city.[24] Crucially, that was the time. Attoe shows that the term appeared for the first time in travel fiction, where it referred to a kind of 'overview' of the city, yet, not from a high point but from a low and distant viewpoint.[25] The city was often viewed from a major entry point to the city. The cultural theorist Christoph Lindner identifies the New York skyline in early twentieth-century literature as a distant view from the south tip of Manhattan towards midtown.[26] Along the same lines, the sociologist Anselm Strauss describes it as a view from Battery Park.[27]

For Strauss, then, the view from Battery Park is a visual representation that symbolizes the city and allows us to understand the city "as a whole."[28] It is this representative skyline that, according to Attoe, is capable of being "the chief symbol for an urban collective;" a representation that can "provide information about those collectives" in that it indicates "what is valued in a community; who is powerful there; what the principle business of the town is; which factors – social, political, economic – appear to have the greatest impact on life in the community."[29] In accordance with Attoe, the architectural historian Robert Tavernor – who the private developers of both the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle appointed as townscape consultant – suggested that a skyline represents the city and has not only local but national and global significance and recognition.[30] Viewed in this light, the 'new London skyline' represents the city in a particular way in order to attract global investment and revenue-generating tourists.[31]

The reading a skyline as a representative representation is politically problematic. In the midst of a city's tall building boom, it additionally raises the question what it is supposedly representative of. It can be understood as being representative of that visual transformation, which is the way it was most commonly approached in the nineteenth century. Alternatively, it can be understood as being

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22 John Burchard and Albert Bush-Brown, *The Architecture of America*: *A Social and Cultural History* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1967). Thomas A. P. van Leeuwen, *The Skyward Trend of Thought: The Metaphysics of the American Skyscraper* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988). Wayne Attoe, *Skylines: Understanding and Moulding Urban Silhouettes* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1981). For a discussion see also Gunter Gassner, "Unfinished and Unfinishable: London's Skylines" (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2013).
23 Burchard and Bush-Brown, *The Architecture of America*.
24 Attoe, *Skylines*.
25 Ibid.
26 Christoph Lindner, "New York Vertical: Reflections on the Modern Skyline," *American Studies* 47(1) (2006).
27 Anselm Strauss, *Images of the American City* (New Jersey: Transaction, 1976).
28 Ibid.: 5.
29 Attoe, *Skylines*, 5 and 29.
30 Robert Tavernor, "From Townscape to Skyscape," *The Architectural Review* 1285 (2004).
31 Robert Tavernor, "Composing London Visually," in *Visualizing the City*, eds Alan R. Marcus and Dietrich Neumann (London: Routledge, 2007).

representative of the city's 'essence' despite its current transformation. And this is the way it is most commonly approached by current historians in London. One of the methods they use is the comparison of an existing – and projected – urban view with a historic painting of the city from a nearby viewpoint. In the planning processes for the Heron Tower and the Pinnacle historians referred to Antonio Canaletto's paintings from Somerset House River Terrace next to Waterloo Bridge from the 1750s. Canaletto's visual interpretation of London as the Venice of the North provided the basis for the argument that St Paul's was the visually prominent structure in the City of London for centuries and that this role should not be redefined. In other words, commercial skyscrapers that dwarf the cathedral should either not be built at all or they should be designed in a way that they do not negatively impact on St Paul's visual dominance.

In other words, when commercial skyscrapers are inscribed in a representation that apparently represents the city, then historians' main concern is the continuing visibility and visual dominance of a historic building such as St Paul's. To this end, the planning tool of protecting views has been developed.[32] While London does not have a legally binding citywide land use plan, the city is cut through with a set of sight lines and viewing corridors from selected viewpoints to "significant buildings", so-called "strategically important landmark buildings."[33] Commercial skyscrapers, historians argue, must not visually harm the visibility and visual appreciability of these buildings, which make "aesthetic, cultural or other contributions" to a view and "assist the viewer's understanding and enjoyment of the view."[34] I describe such a reading of the cityscape as 'visually conservative' and while there is not necessarily a clear alignment with party politics it is important to draw attention to the ways in which the idea that St Paul's should remain the visually dominant structure in the City of London plays into the hands of neoliberal urbanization processes. Private developers and their design teams have long since found ways to build on historian's visual conservatism and argue that commercial skyscrapers in certain locations can be understood in terms of visual "enhancement" of the historic building "rather than it being talked about in a negative way."[35] In short, the very idea that St Paul's should be visually protected in a so-called 'key view' of the city paves the way for the argument that a skyscraper – in particular one that is formally complex and 'iconic' – can be beneficial for the reading of the cathedral.

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[32] Greater London Authority, *The London Plan*: *Spatial Development Strategy for Greater London* (London: Greater London Authority, 2007). Greater London Authority, *London View Management Framework: The London Plan Supplementary Planning Guidance* (London: Greater London Authority, 2012).
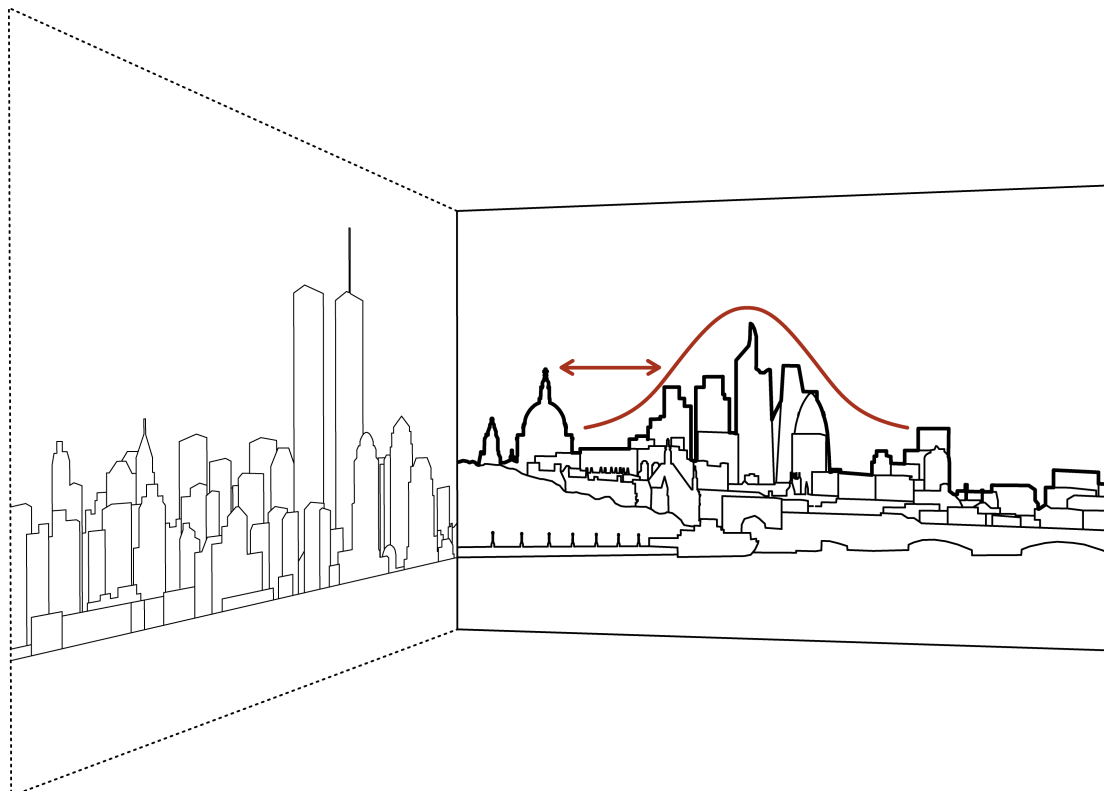[33] Greater London Authority, *The London Plan* (2011): 223.
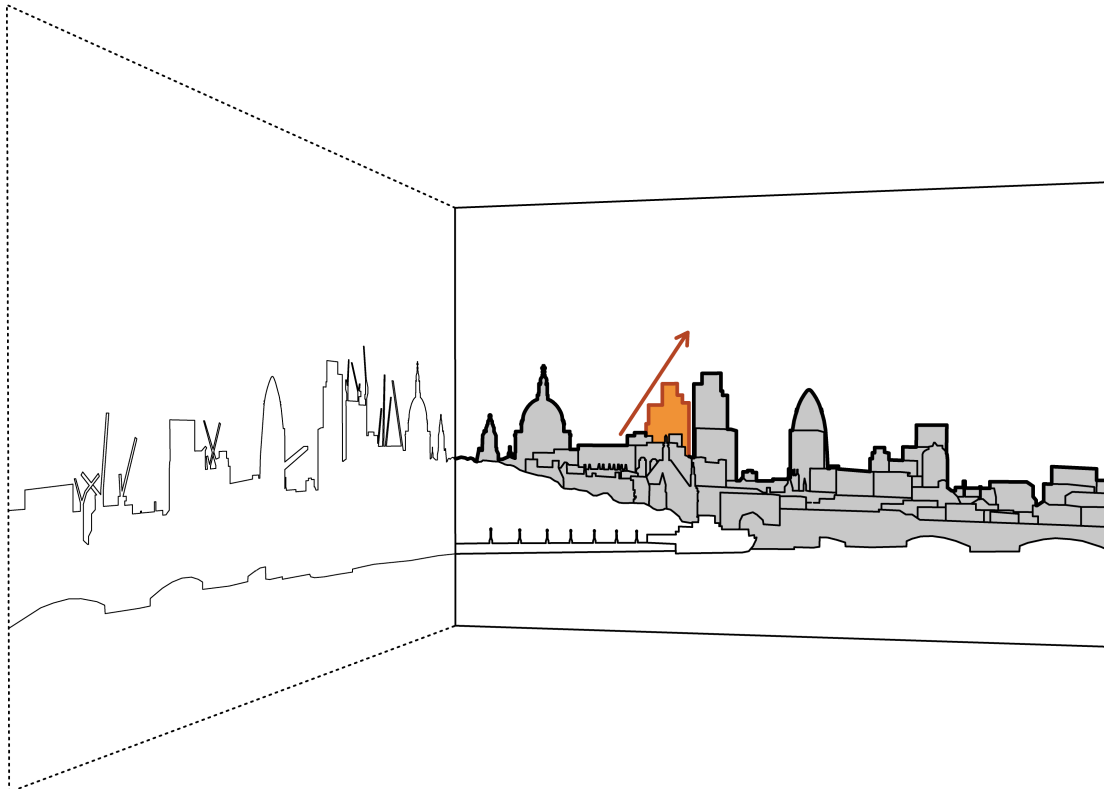[34] Greater London Authority, *London View Management Framework* (2012), 3.
[35] Interview, Architect, 2010.

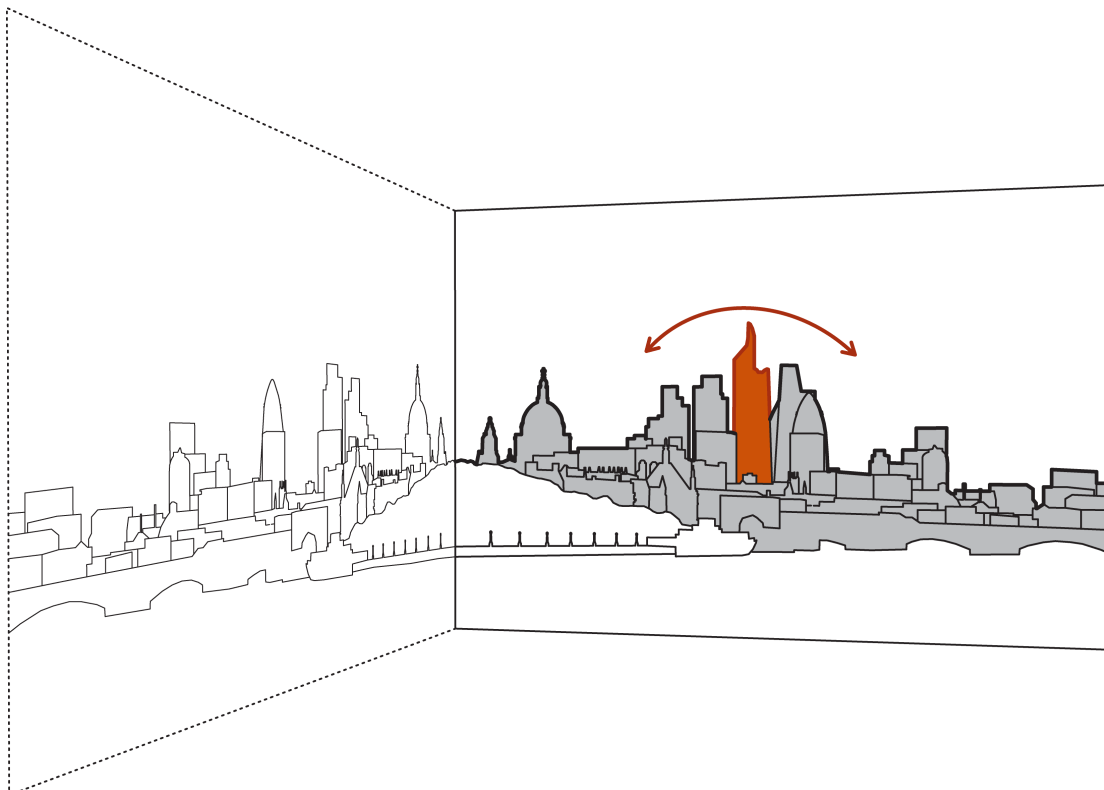St Paul's Heron Tower Tower 42 Pinnacle 30 St Mary Axe
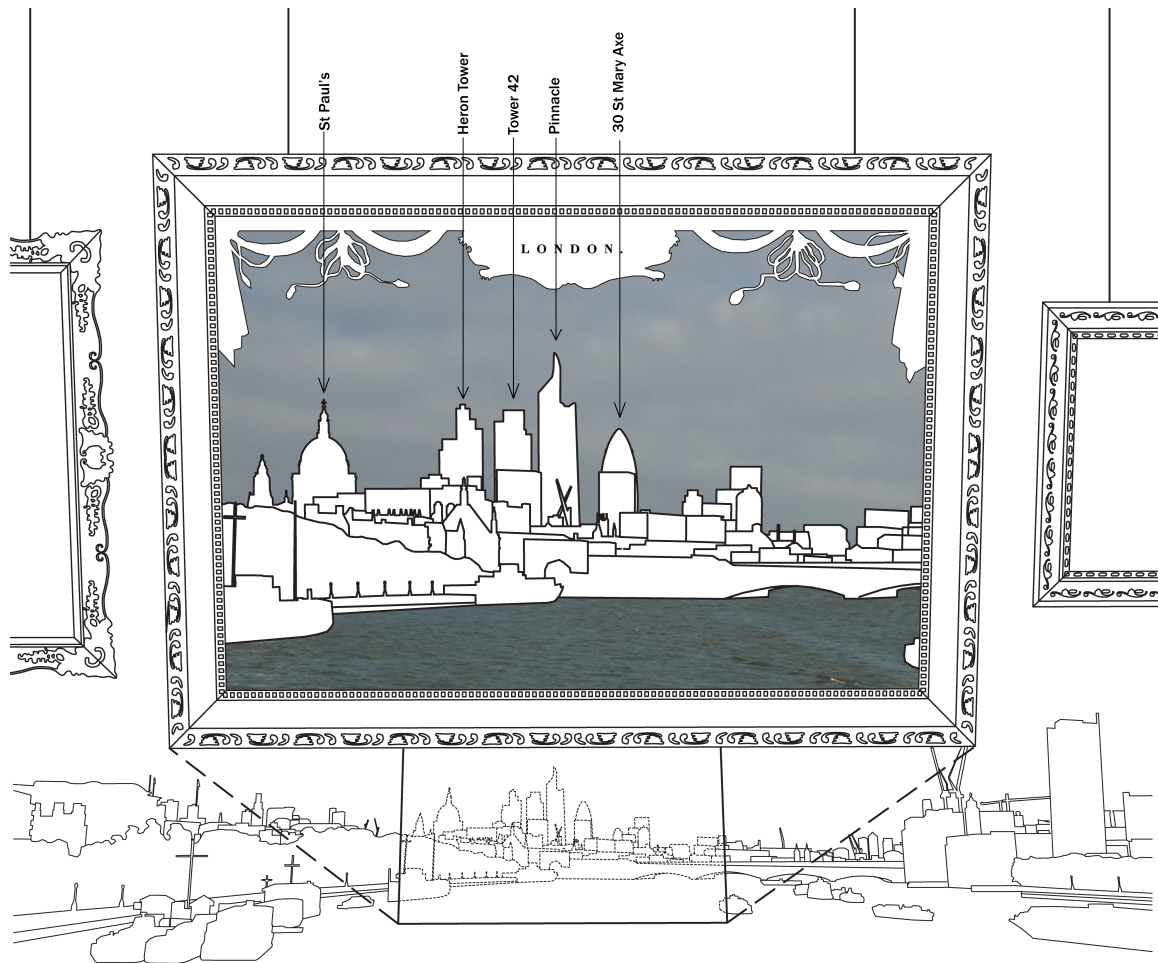
LONDON.

The 'new London skyline' conceptualized as a historic master painting (Gassner, 2016).

The visual relationship between St Paul's and the high-rise cluster in the City of London (Gassner, 2016).

The stepped profile of the Heron Tower (Gassner, 2016).

The Pinnacle as the visual center of the group of tall buildings (Gassner, 2016).

To give just two examples: the stepped profile of the Heron Tower, the designers argued, reinforces the hill-like skyline profile of the emerging group of tall buildings in the City. In so doing, it does not draw attention away from the cathedral but 'complements' it. The Pinnacle, in turn, fills a sky gap in the existing high-rise cluster. Similar to the Heron Tower, it is the Pinnacle's contribution to the group of tall buildings that makes it visually less harmful and, indeed visually beneficial. Historic England supported both of these arguments based on its visually conservative reading of London. "St Paul's is world renowned as one of Britain's most significant historic landmarks," a representative of Historic England stated in the public inquiry for the Heron Tower.[36] "It is London's most notable historic and architectural building and the view of St Paul's, particularly as seen from Waterloo Bridge, is an internationally recognized symbol of the City of London's skyline", which is why these historians "believe it inconceivable that any development should be permitted which damages this iconic view, enjoyed by thousands of people on a daily basis."[37] They value the cathedral "for lots of different reasons, not purely aesthetic, but for its historic, what we feel about it, its community values. […] It is not just a religious symbol, there are many more things associated with it."[38]

In order to understand the ways in which current historians conceptualize the values of historic buildings it pays to explore Historic England's "Seeing the History in the View". In this publication a building like St Paul's is described to have "historical value" in key views of the city, because it is through its visibility that "past people, events and aspects of life can be connected through a place to the present."[39] The wording is crucial. According to Historic England, it is by means of the visibility of historic landmark buildings that the city's past is connected *to* the present. Apart from the limited understanding of what defines the city's past – surely an individual building hardly represents a city's multiple histories – crucial questions here are: first, what form of connection is Historic England proposing? And, second, what is the direction of this connection?

As to the first question: the proposed connection is a promotion of historical continuity. St Paul's is an "unchanging historic landmark," a historian suggests.[40] "St Paul's was designed as a landmark to dominate London's skyline and has done so for almost 3 centuries," Historic England states.[41] Although Historic England also acknowledges that the cathedral's "dominance has been reduced by the construction of tall buildings in the period post World War II," the suggestion is that it should remain "a dominant element on the skyline."[42] St Paul's was, is and remains the visual center of a representative representation of the city.

As to the second question, the direction from which to approach the past and the

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[36] English Heritage, "Opening Statement" (Public Inquiry for the Heron Tower, London, 2002).

[37] Ibid.

[38] Interview, Representative of Historic England, 2010.

[39] English Heritage, *Seeing the History in the View: A Method for Assessing Heritage Significance within Views* (London: English Heritage, 2011): 28.

[40] Gordon Higgott, "Proof of Evidence on behalf of English Heritage" (Public Inquiry for the Heron Tower, London, 2002): 58.

[41] English Heritage, "Opening Statement."

[42] Ibid.

present: Historic England's definition of historical value suggests that the past is brought into the present. However, as I have shown, in current planning processes proposed skyscrapers are assessed in terms of their impacts on a static reading of the historic St Paul's, i.e. the present is represented in a historical space rather than vice versa. With regard to a representative understanding of a skyline, the difference can be described as follows: bringing the past into the present helps us to explore the ways in which historic buildings are monumentalized for a global city image that aims to attract global investment. Representing the present in a historical space frames office towers as structures that are useful for a conservationist image of the city. There is a seminal difference between the two approaches. While in the former the main emphasis is on financialised capitalism, in the latter it is on the 'civic importance' of monuments.

It is not uncommon nowadays that private developers and their design teams frame commercial skyscrapers as structures that are useful for a representation of the city's past. This is why it is so important that we examine the representation they refer to and the ways in which capitalism is embedded in and justified by it. In this respect I see a parallel to the distinction I started this essay with. An historian's critique of capitalism through the city – rather than a critique of the capitalist city – must expose the limitations of a monumental reading of the city. It cannot merely criticize the ways in which towers visually impact on monuments but must address the ways in which the framing of individual historical buildings as monuments promotes the construction of commercial skyscrapers. In other words, a critical reflection on the 'historic London skyline' must be the starting point from which to depart into the contemporary city.

Pathos of Nearness

It should not come as a surprise when citizens dismiss the reading of a particular skyline as a representative representation of the city. Arguably, the view from Waterloo Bridge towards the City of London is hardly representative of the 'whole' city; no matter if St Paul's or office towers visually dominate the view. However, dismissing professional debates on that ground downplays the critical potential that is encapsulated in the city's visual appearance. In my view, a critical engagement with the representativeness of a view – and of historical buildings in this view – is the starting and not the end point of a useful critique. First of all, debates about London's city image are taking place and, hence, they must not be taken lightly. Second, there is no doubt that some urban views are more present in the media than others. This does not make them more representative but it does give them a particular potential for critique.

The constant search for investment that defines capitalist urbanization utilizes a city's unique visual appearance. 'The London skyline' – understood as an image of a well-connected node within the network of advanced financial and business service industries – features therefore both office towers and historic landmarks. It needs the former, because they represent the growing financial and business service industries in the city. It needs the latter, because they stand for London's unique history, which, in turn, makes the image recognizable. Historians who aim to develop a critique of the financialization of real estate must address this double dynamic. In my view, their concern about the city's visual appearance should draw on the subversive quality of aesthetics. Benjamin's approach to historiography, I suggest, provides important

insights.

In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin describes capitalism as a "natural phenomenon with which a new dream-filled sleep came over Europe."[43] Historical awakening from this dream, he suggests, is only possible through recognizing "today's life, today's forms, in the life and in the secondary, lost forms of that epoch [the nineteenth century]."[44] This is why he is interested in the Parisian arcades. These formerly eclectic spaces of consumption had become functionally and socially obsolete and replaced by department stores in the second half of the nineteenth century. As ruins in the twentieth century they can be understood, analyzed and critically engaged with. To put it differently, for Benjamin, the work of time is a precondition for historical awakening and for critique.

How does Benjamin approach the nineteenth in the twentieth century?[45] He 'actualizes' the past with the help of what he himself describes as his "pathos of nearness."[46] Here, pathos of nearness does not refer to an extensive and exclusive interest in what is near. It rather refers to a process of bringing the distant near. "We are trained to view things, in the historical sphere, from a romantic distance," Benjamin contends, while "[o]nly the presentation of what relates to use, what conditions us is important."[47] Or, put differently, the "true method of making things present," he claims, is "to represent them [past events] in our space (not to represent ourselves in their space)."[48]

Representing the present in the historical sphere often leads to a highly abstract historical account, which hampers not only a critical engagement with the past but equally with the present. A monumental reading of the city's past, in which individual buildings in selected views represent the 'whole' city, is such an abstraction. A few historical buildings are seen in terms of "'large contexts.'"[49] Benjamin instances the Cathedral of Chartres and insists that it is absolutely necessary to avoid abstraction and "to receive them [historical landmarks] in our space (not to feel empathy with their builders or their priests). We don't displace our beings into theirs: they step into our life."[50] The same argument, it seems to me, should be made for St Paul's and its current framing in neoliberal urbanization processes. The cathedral needs to step into our life, i.e. it must be examined in the contemporary, global and financialized city. As mentioned above, I argue that historians should evaluate the ways in which St Paul's enables the construction of commercial towers rather than the ways in which commercial towers impact on the reading of the monumental cathedral. The historical narrative about the city that historians build by means of the continuing visual dominance of the cathedral must be examined in terms of its usefulness for

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[43] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002): [K1a,8] 391.

[44] Ibid.: [N1,11] 458.

[45] For a discussion of Benjamin's historiographical approach and his reading of cityscapes see Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996); Graeme Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002); Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

[46] Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, [I°,2] 846.

[47] Ibid.: [C°,5] 831.

[48] Ibid.: [I°,2] 846 and [H2,3] 206.

[49] Ibid.: [I°,2] 846.

[50] Ibid.

transnational capital flows and private strategies of profit maximization. St Paul's needs to step into a context in which, as Harvey argues, these processes are insufficiently democratized.[51]

One of the metaphors that Benjamin uses when he argues for a political and against a symbolic and abstract reading of history is that of balanced scales. Historical knowledge, he suggests, "can be represented in the image of balanced scales, one tray of which is weighted with what has been and the other with knowledge of what is present."[52] The facts that are assembled on the first "can never be too humble or too numerous" while on the other tray "there can be only a few heavy, massive weights."[53] This metaphor is or particular relevance for London's current tall building boom. We need a democratic debate about these heavy, massive weights that are financial capitalism and neoliberalism or, better, we need a debate in which these heavy, massive weights are being fundamentally questioned and contested rather than dissolved into nuanced differences and endless varieties. Clearly, Benjamin is aware of the danger of being too immersed in the contemporary situation, as his support of Epic Theater's 'distancing effect' suggests. He knows the danger of being unable to see the forest for the trees; of being too close to see the 'big picture.' However, refusing to get close is not the answer. The current socio-economic and political system, he believes, can be disturbed by means of a detour through the past. The pair of scales is balanced not merely when we have gained knowledge about history but when we have gained historical knowledge. Historical knowledge, here, is knowledge that awakens us from the dream-filled sleep that is capitalism. Historians' task, then, is to focus on the greatest number of historical facts, to put them on the tray and weigh them against the heavy, massive weights that define urbanization processes today.

When I suggest that historians should look out for multiple urban histories rather than being concerned with a particular historical narrative about the city in order to bring these histories into the system of relations of the present then this does not mean that they should immerse themselves into the past. Benjamin insists on this point. An actualization of the past implies the rejection of historical empathy. Historians must not put themselves into the shoes of "the builders and priests of historical buildings."[54] They must not do that because that would mean that they are trying to "blot out everything [one] knows about the later course of history" and, in that sense, it would actually be opposed to the actualization of the past.[55] Historical empathy, for Benjamin, is a form of uncritical re-construction of the past. What is important, I agree, is that historians do not attempt to overcome temporal distance but, in contrast, that they make use of it. This is a crucial point because blotting out what we know about historical developments, more than anything else, is at danger of justifying an unjust situation in the present. In that sense, historical empathy is the accomplice of historical continuity. In order for unjust situations to be rectified, historical continuity must be

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[51] Harvey, "Right to the City," 37.
[52] Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, [N6,5] 468.
[53] Ibid.: [N6,5] 468.
[54] Ibid.: [I°,2] 846.
[55] Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938–1940*, eds Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006): [Thesis VII] 391.

interrupted. And this cannot be done without acknowledging the course of history.[56]

Distance and Critique

For Benjamin, it is the anecdote and not the news report that brings "things near to us spatially, lets them enter our life," and, in that respect, it "represents the strict antithesis of the sort of history which demands 'empathy,' which makes everything abstract."[57] Because in an anecdote a concrete experience is brought near to the audience, as a member of the audience one is not inclined to blot out everything one knows about the course of history. I am not suggesting that historians should tell anecdotes to politicians, urban developers and architects. Anecdotes are not the work of historians as professionals but they are the work of storytellers – those who bring lived experiences into the present to listening audiences. Still, Benjamin's statement is important, because it directly links temporal and spatial categories.

When Benjamin is concerned about the "romantic distance" from which we look at the world then the word 'romantic' is crucial.[58] What he aims to get at is the idea that distance can be a "deceiving veil" that compounds a sharp eye on things but that this is not necessarily the case.[59] For example, he identifies distance as a deceiving veil in Renaissance paintings, not so, however, in paintings of the Baroque period, which bring "even the distance of the skies into a nearness, one that seeks to startle and confound."[60] The important aspect, I argue, is that distance is not to be understood as the opposite of nearness. Instead, distance should be understood as a necessary and productive condition that allows the creation of nearness.

Perhaps it can be argued that such an understanding of spatial-temporal distance allows historians to develop an 'immanent criticism' of the city. This, at least, is the case when we take Benjamin's account of this early German Romantic notion literally. Immanent criticism, he suggests, provides the work with "self-knowledge" and "self-judgement."[61] It refers to a process in which the critic is "getting nearer to the object and finally drawing it into himself."[62] As I have suggested above, with regard to the contemporary city this implies primarily two dimensions. First, historical buildings must be represented in our space; and our space, we have to recognize, is the financialized city. Rather than being concerned with the visual impact of commercial skyscrapers on selected historic buildings, historians should be concerned about the ways in which these historic buildings have become useful tools for the financialization

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[56] For Benjamin, history is in 'lack of closure.' One dimension that influences this argument is the Kabbalah concept of the breaking of the vessels, which states that as part of the process of creation, God's light was contained in ten vessels which shattered on their way to earth. Rebuilding the vessels is a precondition for redemption. The task of the historian, then, is a process of making something fragmented whole again. While this is not the place to discuss the concept in greater detail, I still want to emphasize that the process of completing history is a prime motivation for Benjamin's redemptive historiography. See Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'* (London: Verso, 2005).

[57] Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, [S1a,3] 545.

[58] Ibid.: [C°,5] 831.

[59] Ibid.: [J77a,8] 354.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Benjamin, "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913–1926*, eds Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004): 151.

[62] Ibid.: 148.

of the city and, as a result, dethrone them and the linear, continuous historical narrative of the city that is built around them. Second, historians must uncover multiple histories of the city. This is another aspect of dethroning a building like St Paul's, which, like the first dimension, must be related to the heavy, massive weights of the present.

In this essay I have developed a positive conceptualization of spatial-temporal distance. Based on my analyses of the ways in which architects, planners and urban historians conceptualize London's historic, current and future cityscapes, a critique of the capitalist city that starts by picking capitalism into pieces is often less powerful than a close examination of practices of city making, which then is related to the heavy, massive weights of the present. This is also the case because since the collapse of the Soviet Communist model the form of society no longer seems to be subject to an ideology-based political decision anymore. For better or worse, many architects, planners and historians 'believe' in capitalist urbanization or, at least, they see no viable alternative to it.[63] My interpretation of Benjamin's conceptualization of the relationship between aesthetic and political validity speaks to that belief. Positioning the work in the relations of production has promise to produce a generative rupture in the established order by opening up new spaces for urban politics.

I suggest that historians should represent the past in the present space and explore multiple histories in order to dethrone singled-out monuments. Yes, a correct comment on politics is insufficient and can be counterproductive for a reorganization of the city as Benjamin suggests. Yet, a work that is positioned in the relations of production can be so incorrectly, too. When some historians believe that monumental history can put limits to the financialisation of the city then this is an example of an incorrect position in the relations of production. This is why I am asking historians to reflect on historiographical approaches. Not in order to become critical theorists but to be critical historians.

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[63] Baecker, "Einleitung," in *Kapitalismus als Religion*, ed. Dirk Baecker (Berlin: Kadmos, 2009): 7.

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