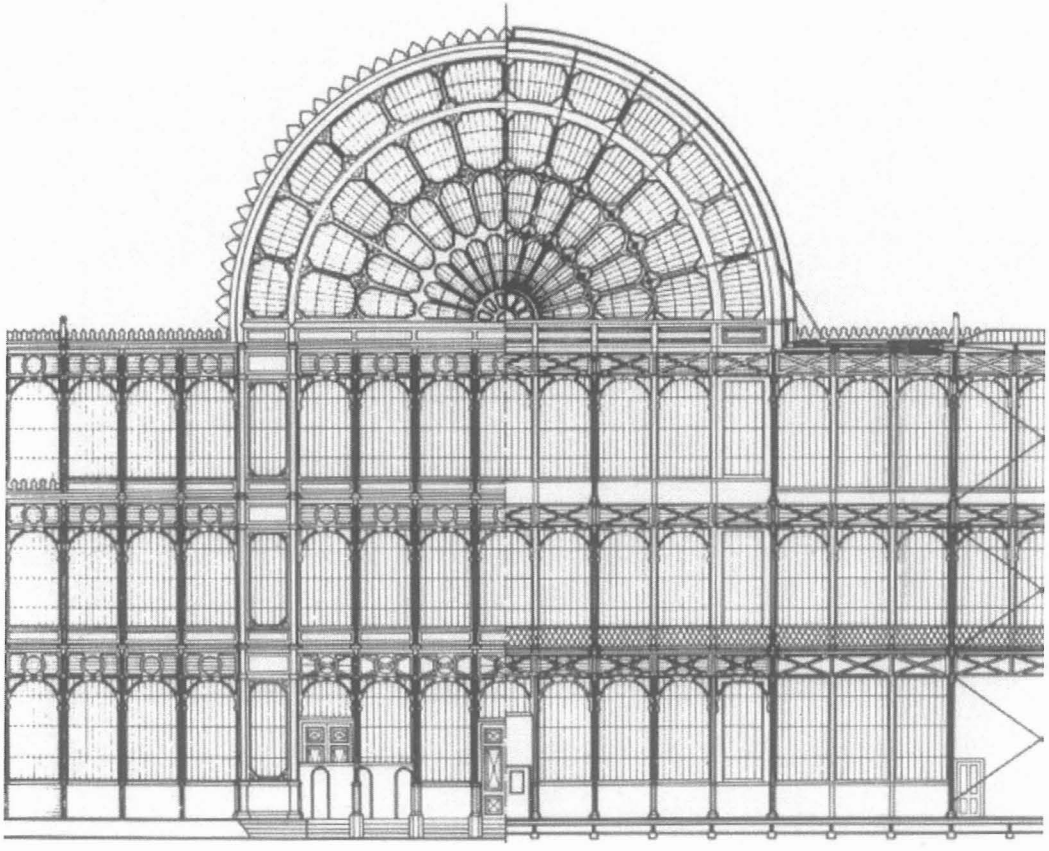
The Crystal Palace*

by Peter Sloterdijk



* Chapter 33 of *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals: Für eine philosophische Theorie der Globalisierung* (In the Global Inner Space of Capital: For a Philosophical Theory of Globalization). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005, pg. 265-276.

Among the 19th-century authors who, with critical reservation, observed the well-advanced games of aggressive global development from the periphery of "retarded" Eastern Europe, Fyodor Dostoyevsky proved to be the most clear-sighted diagnostician. In his story *Notes from the Underground*, published in 1864—which not only represents the foundation charter of modern ressentiment psychology, but also the first expression of opposition to globalization, if the backdating of this expression is legitimate—there is a phrase that summarizes, with unsurpassed metaphorical power, the world's coming into the world at the beginning of the end of the age of globalization: I mean his expression of Western civilization as a "crystal palace." During his stay in London in 1862, Dostoyevsky visited the palace of the World Exhibition in South Kensington (which would surpass the scale of the *Crystal Palace* of 1851) and, by intuition, he immediately grasped the immeasurable symbolic and programmatic dimensions of the hybrid construction. Since the World Exhibition building did not possess its own name, it seems reasonable to assume that Dostoyevsky applied the term *Crystal Palace* to it.[1]

The enormous original, a pre-fabricated building design, started to be constructed in the fall of 1850 in London's Hyde Park according to the plans of horticulture expert Joseph Paxton, and was inaugurated on May 1st, 1851 in the presence of the young Queen Victoria (only to be rebuilt with enlarged proportions in 1854 in the London suburb of Sydenham). Until its destruction by a conflagration in 1936, it counted as a technological wonder of the world—a triumph of serial fabrication planned with military precision.[2] With it, a new aesthetic of immersion began its victory march through modernity. What today we call psychedelic capitalism, was already a *fait accompli* in the, as it were, immaterialized and artificially temperature-controlled building. Around 17,000 exhibitors convened in it during the first World Exhibition, of which 7,200 alone came from Great Britain and its thirty-two colonies. With its construction, the principle of interiority crossed a critical threshold: from then on, it signified neither the bourgeois or aristocratic dwelling, nor its projection into the sphere of urban shopping arcades. Rather, it began to transpose the outside world as a whole into a magical immanence transfigured by luxury and cosmopolitanism. After it had been converted into a giant hothouse and an imperial cultural museum, it betrayed the contemporary tendency to make nature and culture jointly into indoors affairs. And although the *Crystal Palace* was not initially conceived for musical performances, it developed into a stage of singular concert performances and, with classical music programmes in front of huge audiences, anticipated the era of pop concerts in stadiums.[3]

Not long after, Dostoyevsky connected the skeptical impressions that his London visit had left him to the intense aversion he felt after reading Chernyshevsky's novel *What Is To Be Done?*, published in 1863, and developed from this association of ideas the 19th century's most powerful vision of a critique of civilization. Famous for its time, (and of a resolutely pro-Western tendency), and with consequences that would extend all the way to Lenin, this book announced the "New Man" who, after accomplishing the technical solution to the social question, would live amongst his peers in a communal palace of glass and metal—the archetype of shared accommodation in the East and the West. Chernyshevsky's culture palace was conceived as a luxury edifice with an artificial climate, in which an eternal spring of consensus would prevail. Here, the sun of good intentions would shine day and night, the peaceful coexistence of everyone with everyone would go without saying. Sentimentality without limits would determine the interior climate, and an overextended humanitarian house morale would necessarily lead to the spontaneous participation of everyone in the fates of everyone else. For Dostoyevsky, the image of all "society" entering the palace of civilization symbolized the will of the Western fraction of humanity to conclude, in a posthistorical détente, the initiative it had launched towards world happiness and understanding among peoples. After the writer had, through his deportation to Siberia, become acquainted with existence in a "house of the dead," the perspective of a closed house of the living revealed itself now to him: biopolitics begins as an enclosed structure.

At this point, the motive of the "end of history" begins its triumphal procession. The visionaries of the 19th century, like the communists in the 20th century, had already understood that social life after the end of combatant history could only play out in an extensive interior, an interior space ordered like a house and endowed with an artificial climate. Whatever one may understand by the term real history, it should, like its spearheads, sea voyages and expansionist wars, remain the perfect example of undertakings in the open air. But if historical battles should lead to eternal peace, the whole of social life would have to be integrated into a protective housing. Under such conditions, no further historical events could occur, at most household accidents. Accordingly, there would be no more politics and no more voters, but rather only contests for votes between

parties and fluctuations among their consumers. Who could deny that the Western world—particularly the European Union after its relative completion in May and the signing of its constitution in October 2004—embodies today in its essential characteristics precisely such a great interior?

This gigantic hothouse of détente is dedicated to a cheerful and hectic cult of Baal, for which the 20th century has proposed the term consumerism. The capitalistic Baal, which Dostoyevsky thought he had recognized in the shocking sight of the World Exhibition Palace and the London pleasure-seeking masses, did not take shape any less in the building itself than in the hedonistic turbulence that dominated its interior. Here, a new doctrine of Final Things is formulated as a dogmatics of consumption. Upon the erection of the Crystal Palace, only the "crystallization" of relations in their entirety could follow—with this fateful term, Arnold Gehlen[4] connected directly to Dostoyevsky. Crystallization designates the plan to generalize boredom normatively and to prevent the renewed intrusion of "history" into the posthistorical world. To encourage and protect benign paralysis is, in future, the goal of all state power. By nature, the boredom guaranteed by the Constitution would dress itself in the form of a project: its psychosocial jingle is the atmosphere of renewal, optimism its basic key. In fact, in the posthistorical world, all the signs must point towards the future because in it lies the only promise that can be made absolutely to an association of consumers: that comfort does not stop flowing and growing. Therefore, the concept of human rights is inseparable from the great march towards comfort, as long as the freedoms that they signify prepare the self-fulfilment of consumers. Consequently, they are on everyone's lips only where the institutional, legal and psychodynamic foundation of consumerism is to be erected.

However, it was Dostoyevsky's firm conviction that eternal peace in the crystal palace could only lead to the psychic exposure of its inhabitants. Détente, says the Christian psychologist, inevitably results in releasing evil in the human being. What was original sin is revealed, in the climate of universal comfort, as a trivial freedom to do evil. Moreover, evil, stripped of its historical pretexts and utilitarian accoutrements, can only crystallize into its quintessential form in posthistorical boredom (*skuka*): purified of all excuses, it will now be obvious, possibly surprising for the naïve, that evil possesses the quality of pure whim. It expresses itself as bottomless settlement, as an arbitrary taste for suffering and for letting-suffer, as roaming destruction with no specific motive. Modern evil is unemployed negativity—an unmistakeable product of the posthistorical situation. Its popular edition is sadomasochism in the middle-class household, where harmless people mutually bind themselves to the bedposts to experience something new; its version of luxury is aesthetic snobbism, which professes the primacy of accidental preference. In the youth markets, where the *prêt-à-révolter*[5] is distributed, this integrated evil appears cool. Value or non-value—both go by the results of the roll of the dice. Without a particular reason, in boredom, the one is valued, the other rejected. Whether one, with Kant, calls this evil a radical evil, is objectively inconsequential. Because its roots cannot reach deeper than the mood, nothing is gained from the term "radical"—it makes an ontological theatrical clap of thunder in order to explain that one does not know, ultimately, where evil comes from.

Is it still necessary to say that Heidegger's great phenomenology of boredom, of 1929-1930, can only be understood as breaking out of the crystal palace established across all of Europe (although heavily battered by war damages), whose moral and cognitive interior climate—the unavoidable absence of all valid convictions and the superfluity of all personal decisions—is more clearly grasped here than anywhere else? With his description of inauthentic existence in *Being and Time* (1927), notably in the notorious paragraphs on the "one" (which could have been inspired by Kierkegaard's invectives against the "public" in *A Literary Review*), Heidegger had prepared his investigation into the basic sensibilities of the bored *Dasein*. It was here that the phenomenological revolt against the exigencies of the sojourn in technical housing took shape. What is later called *Ge-stell* is for the first time at this point extensively illuminated—above all with respect to the inauthentic existence, deprived of itself. Where everyone is the other, and nobody is himself, the human being is swindled out of his *Ekstase*, his loneliness, his own decision, his direct relationship to the absolute outside, death. Mass culture, humanism, biologism are the lively masks behind which is hidden, according to the philosopher's insight, the deep boredom of *Dasein* without challenge. The task of philosophy would thus be to burst the glass roof above one's own head, in order once again to bring the individual into immediate contact with the monstrous.

Whoever remembers the Punk phenomenon, which haunted the youth cultures of the 1970s and 1980s, can recall a second example of the relationship between the fluid omnipresence of boredom and generalized aggression. To a certain extent, Heidegger was the Punk-philosopher

of the 1920s, an angry young intellectual who rattled the bars of orthodox philosophy (*Schulphilosophie*)—but not only those bars: he also shook the grilles of urban comfort and the welfare state's systems for dispossessing existence. In order to appreciate his philosophical motives—that is, the temporal-logical core of his reflexion—one has to recognize in them the attempt to mischievously redramatize the posthistorical world of boredom—even at the expense of appointing the catastrophe as the schoolmistress of life. In this sense, Heidegger might have said of the "national revolution," in which he briefly included himself, that an epoch of rehistorization was initiated in the here and now and he was not only present, but he had even thought it in advance and had heroically deduced its meaning. From Germany, the centre of contemplation, Heidegger, as the dramaturge of Being which is supposed to occur anew, articulates the postulate of escaping the posthistorical dullness in order, as if at the last moment, to admit history once again; "history," let it be understood, is according to this logic not made, but rather medially suffered. The Germans, as the only people capable of suffering the open and the monstrous, were once again supposed to take flight in great style and summon the world to witness their passion. According to the philosopher, it would have been incumbent upon them to bring proof that in the midst of the comfortable and the arbitrary there still exists an "evidence" that can command historical acts—an evidence that appears more in the attentive ear than in the skeptical eye. For no one is looking out, but some hear a call from outside. Had the Germans accomplished what Heidegger's fantasizing expected of them, then they would have made friends and enemies understand that they are the ones whom the light of necessity illuminates as if for the last time.[6] But the irony of the situation intended that the evidence change camps and take up quarters with the enemy: antifascism was really the clearest thing that the epoch could offer from a moral perspective. To top it all, it allied itself with the US-Americans, the paradigmatic emigrants from "history," who, adding to the total interior of the crystal palace, invented the posthistorical national and amusement parks under the open sky.

The power of Dostoyevsky's crystal palace metaphor for the philosophy of history is best measured when juxtaposed with Walter Benjamin's interpretation of the Parisian arcades. The comparison is suggestive because in the one case as in the other an architectural form was proclaimed as the key for the capitalistic condition of the world. Through synchronous observation it becomes immediately clear why Benjamin falls behind Dostoyevsky, although the latter was content with a rather laconic poetic vision, while the former immersed himself over many years in the study of his subject. Benjamin's works on being-in-the-world as the dazzlement of the capitalistic maya were, by the choice of its subject, condemned to implausibility, especially since from the outset they ran the risk of explaining the current situation by means of an anachronistic object: they focused on a type of building outdated from an architectural, economic, urban and aesthetic point of view in order to load it with the entire weight of a hermeneutics of capital; the well-known expression that he wished, in view of the arcades, to write a "prehistory of the 19th century," betrays Benjamin's unclear claim to seek the supratemporal in the obsolete. In all the expressive forms of the modern financial context, Benjamin wanted to read the codes of alienation, as if not only the dear Lord was hiding in the details, as believed by Spinozists[7] and Warburgians, but also the adversary. The ideology of detail nourished itself from the assumption that exchange value, this otherwise seemingly invisible *genius malignus* of the modern world, took shape in the ornamentation of wares and revealed itself in the arabesques of arcade architecture. According to such superstition of detail, Benjamin's investigations seized up in underground library studies, forced into a hopeless direction by a genius without freedom. The more material they accumulated, the more they buried the fertile thought of the enterprise to lay bare the interior and context-creating energy of the capitalistic *modus vivendi*. Benjamin's interpretation of the arcades was inspired by the realistic, albeit trivial, Marxist insight that behind the gleaming surfaces of the world of merchandise, a rather unpleasant, sometimes wretched work world was concealed; it was distorted by the suggestion that the capitalistic global context was, as such, hell—inhabited by the damned who regrettably learn nothing politically from their damnation. Through sombre allusions it was suggested that the lovely world under glass was a metamorphosis of Dante's inferno. Against this background, it was not possible to conceptualize how a democratic reconstruction of the arcades could take place or, even more, to clarify the question whether it would be conceivable or even desirable for the "masses" to escape from the matrix or the "field" of capitalism. Seen as a whole, Benjamin's studies testify to the vindictive fortune of the melancholiac who compiles an archive of evidence for the waywardness of the world.

Should Benjamin's important impulses for the 20th century and the early 21st be extended, they would also have to, above and beyond several indispensable

methodological rectifications, reorient themselves in the matter; they would have to measure themselves on the architectural models of the present—above all the shopping malls (which, since the opening of *Southdale*, close to Minneapolis, the first building complex of this type designed by Victor Gruen in October 1954, spread like an epidemic across the USA and the rest of the world), the convention centres, great hotels, sports arenas and indoor theme parks. Such studies could sooner carry the title *The Crystal Palace Project* or *The Hothouse Project*, as a last resort even *The Space Station Project*.[8] Indisputably, the arcades embodied a suggestive spatial concept in the age of incipient consumerism—they fulfilled the fusion, so stimulating for Benjamin, of salon and universe in a public interior; they were in the eyes of the researcher the "temples of commodity capital," "street[s] of lascivious commerce,"[9] a projection of the bazaar from the Orient into the bourgeois world and a symbol of the metamorphosis of all things in the light of purchasability—the stage of a *féerie*[10] that magically transforms the customer for the length of his stay into a virtual master of the world. The Crystal Palace, however, the one near London that housed the World Exhibition and later the amusement park (dedicated to "national education"), but also and even more the one in Dostoyevsky's text that was supposed to make "society" as a whole into an exhibit in itself, already indicated something that went well beyond arcade architecture. Benjamin certainly made frequent reference to the building, but wanted to recognize in it little more than an enlarged arcade (just as he also only saw "cities of arcades" in Fourier's installations for utopian communities)—here, his admirable physiognomic sight left him in the lurch. He disobeyed the basic rule of media analysis, according to which the format is the message. For while the elite arcades, which never exceeded smaller and medium dimensions, served to make the world of merchandise cozy [*gemütlich*][11] and its mise-en-scène glamorous in a covered promenade, the enormous Crystal Palace—the valid prophetic building form of the 19th century (which was immediately copied around the world)—already pointed to an integral, experience-oriented, popular capitalism, in which nothing less was at stake than the complete absorption of the outer world into an inner space that was calculated through and through. The arcades constituted a canopied intermezzo between streets and squares; the Crystal Palace, in contrast, already conjured up the idea of a building that would be spacious enough in order, perhaps, never to have to leave it again. (A possibility that Dostoyevsky played out with the thought experiment of the "enclosed palace" in his *The House of the Dead*.) Its increasing integrativity [*Integretivität*] did not, admittedly, serve to elevate capitalism to the rank of a religion that universalizes fault and debts, as Benjamin assumed in an eccentric early note,[12] it led, on the contrary, to the replacement of the psychosemantic protective shield, proposed by historical religions, through systems of the activist provision of public services [*Daseinsvorsorge*]. This more abstract and bigger interior cannot be made visible with the methods of Benjaminian treasure-seeking in libraries.[13]

If one has accepted the metaphor "Crystal Palace" as an emblem for the final ambitions of modernity, one can then restate the frequently noted and frequently denied symmetry between the capitalistic and socialistic programme: socialism-communism was simply the second construction site of the palace project. After its conclusion, it became obvious that communism was one step on the path towards consumerism. In its capitalistic interpretation, the currents of desire blossom with incomparably more power—something that is gradually admitted as well by those who had bought socialism stocks at the exchange of illusions, stocks of which one will keep several examples like the yellowed German one-billion *Reichsmark* bills from the year 1923. Of capitalism, on the other hand, one can only say now that it always already meant more than simply a production relation; its imprinting force [*Prägekraft*] always went much further than the figure of thought "world market" is able to indicate. It implies the project of transposing the entire life of work, wishes, and expression of the people that it has captured into the immanence of purchasing power.

Translated by Michael Darroch, University of Windsor, 2008.

NOTES

1 For more on this subject, see *Sphären III, Schäume* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004), pg. 344-350. The literary reflections of Dostoyevsky's visit to London are found in his travel feature *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* (1863), a text in which the author makes fun, among other things, of the "sergeant-majors of civilization," the hothouse character of the "orangery progressivists," and articulates his fear of the Baalish triumphalism of the World Exhibition palace. Dostoyevsky reads the French bourgeoisie as the posthistorical equation of humanness and the possession of purchasing power: "Money is the highest virtue and human obligation."

2 On the construction history cf. Chup Friemert, *Die gläserne Arche. Kristallpalast London 1851 und 1854* (Munich: Prestel, 1984).

3 Cf. Michael Musgrave, *The Musical Life of the Crystal Palace* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995).

4 Arnold Gehlen (1904-1976), a conservative German philosopher and sociologist who developed early theoretical perspectives on "post-histoire" and "cultural crystallization." Cf. his essay *Über kulturelle Kristallisation* (Bremen: Angelsachsen-Verlag, 1961)—trans.

5 In French in the original—trans.

6 On the interpretation of Heidegger's boredom theory in the context of the development of modern irony and détente, see *Sphären III, Schäume*, pg. 728f.

7 Cf. Spinoza, *Ethics*, Section 5, Proposition 24: "The more we understand particular things, the more do we understand God."

8 Cf. the chapter "Absolute Inseln" in *Sphären III, Schäume*, pg. 317-338.

9 Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Volume V, Part 1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989), pg. 86 and 93; (see *The Arcades Project*, translated by H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP: 1999): pg. 37 [A2,2] and pg. 42 [A3a,7]—trans.).

10 In French in the original—trans.

11 On the motif of "cozy" [*gemütlich*] and "uncomfortable" [*ungemütlich*] capitalism cf. Dieter and Karin Claessens, *Kapitalismus als Kultur: Entstehung und Grundlagen der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979).

12 "Kapitalismus als Religion" (1921), *Gesammelte Schriften*, Volume VI (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985), pg. 100-103; (see "Capitalism as Religion" in: Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Volume 1: 1913-1926*, edited by M. Bullock and M.W. Jennings (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1996) pg. 288-291).

13 On the problem of perception and representation offered by the capitalistic context of existence in its entirety, cf. *Sphären III, Schäume.*