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The Ghost-Image on Metropolitan Borders—In Terms of *Phantom of the Opera* and 19th-Century Metropolis Paris

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Abstract: This paper reviews Gaston Leroux’s *Phantom of the Opera* in the context of the social and cultural changes of the metropolis Paris at the end of the 19th century. *The Phantom of the Opera*, a success in the literary world and widely proliferated in its musical and film renditions afterward, is considered and interpreted mainly in the literary and artistic tradition. In this paper, however, this work will be considered from an urban sociological perspective, especially from that of Walter Benjamin, who developed the theory of the urban culture, focusing on the dreaming collectives at the end of the 19th century. Leroux’s novel can be regarded as an exemplary social form of the collective dreams of the period expressed in arts, architectures, popular stories and films and other popular arts. Given the premise that the dream images in the novel, so-called kitsch, reflect the fears and desires of the bourgeois middle class that were pathologized in the figure of the ghost, this paper reveals the cultural, social and transnational implications of the Ghost-Image in relation to the rapidly changing borders of the 19th century metropolis.

Keywords: Gaston Leroux; Walter Benjamin; ghost; kitsch; dreamimage; metropolis; urban sociology; communicability; Paris; Opera House

1. The Image is an Encounter

Walter Benjamin lauded *The Phantom of the Opera* (1911) as “one of the great novels of the nineteenth century” and said that Gaston Leroux (1868–1927) “has brought the genre to its apotheosis” ([1], p. 447) in his mention of some writers of a detective story at the time. Although he did not write any essays on the novel of a great length, he highly recommends it to the readers in the list of this genre of his short piece “Crime, Novels on Travel”.

The Phantom of the Opera is, of course, rather different from typical detective stories. Despite the criminal acts of the ghost that lead the narrative in *The Phantom of the Opera*, a conspicuous detective-figure does not appear; nevertheless, the character of the Persian seems to take on the role of the detective implicitly. This would also be one of examples, which have shown the entanglement of familiar and strange images since Poe.¹ The cultural and social implications of this kind of entanglement beyond cultural, social, and national borders, represented in the protagonists and settings of the Phantom of the Opera, are our key issues here.

People usually consider the novel in the literary tradition from “Greco-Roman mythology and medieval folklore” to the “beauty and the beast” ([3], p. x) for the love story between Christine and the ghost, Erik, certainly falls within these literary traditions. Moreover, the psychoanalytical approaches tend toward the self, divided into the conscious and unconscious to reveal a kind of patriarchal unconsciousness (see: [4], pp. 155–167) at work at that time. All of these approaches are helpful to better understand the novel.

On the other hand, the social problem reflected in this novel seems relatively minor considering such literary and psychoanalytical approaches. However, this novel, particularly regarding the “demographic growth, social changes, and political unrest” ([5], p. 176) of the metropolis Paris at the end of the 19th century, offers complicated descriptions of the collective (un)consciousness of Parisians amid such changes, which is projected to and incarnated in the figure of the ghost. The ghost in Leroux’s novel reflects the fears and desires of the bourgeois facing huge cultural and social changes at the end of the nineteenth century, in which Benjamin argued that “the individual consciousness more and more secures itself in reflecting, while the collective consciousness sinks into ever deeper sleep” ([6], p. 389).

In the *Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin attempted to approach the dream and its images of the Parisians through the lens of contemporary art, fashion, architecture, propaganda, film, and other popular arts, that were saturated with the collective dreams. Leroux’s novel would have been a good source to support Benjamin’s effort to look into the collective (un)consciousness expressed in the cultural products and urban landscape. However, there are only a few researches on the contextual relations between Leroux’s novel and Benjamin’s perspective regarding this urban culture.

Therefore, cross-reading of the two authors’ text will be offered here focusing on the “collective dreaming” of the fin de siècle, where social and cultural borders have started to be entangled and kitsch images—unoriginal, readily available for consumption, and exhibiting a deep relation to technical reproduction, ranging from popular art and propaganda to metropolitan architecture and film—have been engendered from the abyss of the blurred borders.

Thereby, this exploration does not begin from the assumption that any entities exist behind the collective dreaming, but from the thesis: “the Image is an encounter” ([7], p. 97). In this sense, images can be considered as a social and historical category for they cannot be taken merely as visual entities representing something behind them, but should be recognized as related to the historical communicability and recognizability (see: [7], p. 92; [8], p. 64.) as the social and historical condition of image circulation and creation.

¹ McLuhan pointed out that since Poe’s Dupin, “the dandified esthete and the noble savage...united their anti-social instincts to produce the detective” ([2], p. 629).

Regarding this, the ghost image marks a historical limitation when the Parisian was encountering a new phenomenon of the metropolis. Considering this, this paper will reconstruct the semantic of the ghost-Image on metropolitan borders in the cultural, social and transnational context with the assumption that it is also related to the way Parisians come to terms with the drastic contemporary changes of the metropolis.

2. Décor of the Grave

The Phantom of the Opera is set within and around the opera house, which was built between 1861 and 1875, coinciding with Haussmann's reconstructing Paris under the order of Napoleon III. The reconstruction of Paris had lasted fifteen years and gave a new shape to the metropolis. Just as the historical evaluations of the reconstruction of Paris by Haussmann have been ambivalent, views on the grand opera house as "an urban center, a center of social life" ([6], p. 410) built alongside the reshaping of Paris also indicates a big gap. One says it is "most modern," while the other says it is "décor of the grave" (Le Corbuisier).

Publisher's notes on the Paris opera house, from the original American edition of the Phantom of the Opera (1911) house, reveal how splendid and luxurious the building was: "(g)iant stairways and colossal halls, huge frescoes and enormous mirrors, gold and marble, satin and velvet, met the eye at every turn" ([3], pp. 269–270). As one of the entries in Benjamin's arcade project shows, "it was the stage on which imperial Paris could gaze at itself with satisfaction" ([6], p. 410).

Within this phantasmagorical house, Gaston Leroux was constructing a plot that included the falling chandelier accident, the kidnapping of a singer, and the discovery of the dead body of Count Philippe on the bank of the lake that was said to exist in the lower cellars of the Opera on the Rue Scribe side, all of which he coalesced into the concept of the ghost, whose skeleton, he insists in the prologue, was allegedly found in the cellar of the house when workmen were digging up the substructure of the opera house.

"The Opera ghost really existed" ([3], p. 1) addressed Leroux at the beginning of his book written in 1910 but set in 1880s during the *Belle Epoque* (see: [9], p. 155). The opera house is divided in the image presented by the author into two distinct spheres; namely the upper part and lower part. This distinct spatial division by the trapdoor can be regarded as a legacy of the stereotype of Paris's underworld, which was adopted by so many literary works at that time. The residence of Erik, the ghost, located in the cellar linked to an allegedly existing lake, is described as a typical bourgeois Louis Philippe-style room, the symbol of a decaying, vanishing culture.

The ghost, Erik, says in the room, "You are looking at my furniture?...It is all that I have left of my poor unhappy mother" ([3], p. 248). The middle-class room with "the wooden bedstead, the waxed mahogany chair, the chest of drawers, those brasses, the little square antimacassars carefully placed on the backs of the chairs" ([3], p. 248) symbolizes a class descending to ruin regarding its economic and cultural status. The ghost's residence almost corresponds to Benjamin's comments on this type of room in his *One Way Street* as a playground of a detective story, where "the soulless luxury of the furnishings becomes true comfort only in the presence of a dead body" ([1], p. 447).

From a cultural history perspective, the end of the 19th century signifies the beginning of the fall of the high bourgeois culture and the rise of mass culture. The opera house, in which the high bourgeois

cultural goods had been performed, already showed a certain gap in the cultural preference of the modern city at the time in which other modern-style music had begun to appear. This cultural change is suggested in the plot of the novel, where art finds its supreme practice only through a decaying, older generation, namely the father of Christine and the ugly ghost. In other words, traditional art had also begun to be marginalized, and its fulfillment, ironically, is related to the semantics of a distorted figure, or even death.

Christine herself, playing a famous opera singer, hints at the profanization and secularization of the art. “After her father’s death, she acquired a distaste of everything in life, including her art. She went through the conservatoire like a poor soulless singing machine” ([3], p. 89). Through voice lessons under the tutelage of the ghost called the angel of music, she can recover her musical capacity. Christine even confesses that she follows his instructions like a machine ([3], p. 119).

Fine art, especially as practiced by the ghost, Erik, can be understood as a sphere of the profanized divine. After Kant’s diagnosis of the modern differentiation of the spheres of morality, cognition, and religion, the romanticists, including their predecessor Kant, thought that beauty could become a sphere in which the spheres of knowledge and morality could be linked. Kant, with a hesitating ambivalence, and Schelling with a strong appeal and conviction toward art, hoped that art could recover the totality of the modern spheres of everyday life.

At the end of the 19th century, however, this desire was proven not to last in the face of the industrialization and popularization of art, as Walter Benjamin’s “the art in the era of technical reproduction” shows. So, the death of the artist and the ugly ghost in Leroux’s novel can be understood as revealing such dilemmas, which fine art had started to encounter. “Benjamin tends to see all art which dissociates itself from technological evolution as being trapped in a social limbo” ([10], p. 52). Of course, the artistic genius has long been regarded as the talent of an exceptional person. The imagination of the ghost as an artistic and architectural genius in the novel might come partly from these traditional views.

However, any individuum of talent and genius is not at issue in the novel. Rather, the semantics of death, accompanied by the ghost, represents art as a decaying process and a kind of dialectical transference of the divine into the mundane, as suggested by the figure of the ghost. Specifically, a traditional performance is changed into a comical incident by the ghost, who transforms the voice of the singer Carlotta, playing Margarita of Faust, into the sound of a toad “Co-ack” ([3], p. 78). Leroux describes the incident as a “catastrophe that broke the arms of the venus de milo” ([3], p. 78).

The blurred cultural borders between generations and classes are evident and cannot be integrated by any traditional art forms during mass consumption. The opera house is, in this sense, a paradoxical place for the traditional art forms. The functional machinery and anonymous structure of the building—like a labyrinth resembling a modern metropolis—do not allow the art to find its authentic residence. Ironically, the transcendental homelessness of the modern is revealed in the home of the art, whose splendid phantasmagory shrouds the decaying process of the bourgeois middle class and its high culture. So, the ornament of the opera can be regarded as a kind of kitsch image open to mass consumption.

Menninghaus points out, “Even Haussmann’s use of aesthetic perspectives to embellish his grand boulevards is seen by Benjamin as a kitsch application of aesthetic ornaments to a town-planning technique essentially dissociated from all traditional forms of the fine arts: ‘Haussmann’s predilection

for perspectives, for long open vistas, represents an attempt to dictate art forms to the technology...of city planning. This always results in kitsch' (AP. E2a, 7)" ([10], p. 52).

3. Danger and Excitement of the Ghost

Technology has given a new shape to the metropolis Paris. Memories of the original have begun to disappear, and only kitsch images as "a grey coating of dust on things" ([11], p. 3) have remained near to the urban masses. The opera house itself as a "place of pageantry" was also not referred to "a court" any more but instead it was named "le tout paris (all fashionable Paris)" ([6], p. 410). This house also contains every kind of character found in a modern city:

"There are 2,531 doors and 7,593 keys; 14 furnaces and 450 grates heat the house; the gaspipes if connected would form a pipe almost 16 miles long; 9 reservoirs, and two tanks hold 22,222 gallons of water and distribute their contents through 22,829 2-5 feet of piping; 538 persons have places assigned wherein to change their attire. The musicians have a foyer with 100 closets for their instruments." ([3], p. 269).

This fabric-like opera house is a big, functional, modern building with so many salaried men.² In his novel Leroux often calls the house a labyrinth, having numerous secret rooms and hidden passages, comparing it with sultans' palaces and their cities, in whose construction the ghost Erik is said to be engaged and afterward is said to join in the construction of the opera house. Erik is brought near to the fears about the modern technical apparatus in constructing buildings and illusions that cause what Benjamin calls the "bourgeois pandemonium" ([1], p. 447).

The first accident depicting the chaos in *The Phantom of the Opera* is based on the real story. It happens almost simultaneously with the change of Carlotta's voice into that of a toad. The two-ton chandeliers fall on the night of the gala performance and kill a patron of the opera house, who wanted to have box room 5, which was given to nobody but wanted by the ghost earlier. A newspaper heading is quoted at the end of the chapter: "Two Hundred Kilos on the Head of a Concierge" ([3], p. 80).

The invisible functionaries of the huge modern building were so traumatized. And the living in the metropolis was pathologized by the people, who have nostalgia to transgress back to the old Paris. While some intellectuals welcomed the changes of the metropolis, some other critics understood them as satanic. The second episode about stolen money through the "magic envelope" refers to this kind of doubt towards modern metropolis.

Twenty notes of a thousand francs demanded by the ghost were being delivered. Two managers of the opera house, Richard and Moncharmin, tried to examine the deliverance but found in the end that the money was replaced by flash notes. The envelope was changed first and disappeared the second

² There are also hundreds of workers serving in the opera house, such as stage carpenters, stage upholsterers, gas men, and a squad of firemen. There are also call-boys, property men, dressers, coiffeurs, supernumeraries, and artists. Leroux describes almost the same about the opera house in his novel: "There were the door-shutters, the old, worn-out scene-shifters, on whom a charitable management had taken pity, giving them the job of shutting doors above and below the stage. They went about incessantly, from top to bottom of the building, shutting the doors" ([3], p. 192). "The supernumeraries number about one hundred; some are hired by the year, but the 'masses' are generally recruited at the last minute and are generally working men who seek to add to their meager earning" ([3], p. 269).

time from the pocket of the manager with a safety pin, in front of the other manager, who was watching the pocket the whole time.

According to Kalifa, thieves and pickpockets were scouring the functional places of Haussmannian Paris, such as the “train station, racetracks...the wooded parks of Bologne and of Vincennes, which were said to be full of prowlers, and, of course, the Metro, the underground, which rapidly became the scene of new violence” ([12], p. 182). The opera house used to be crowded by so many guests that it might not have been exceptional from such crimes. However, what is at issue in the episode of the stolen money is the deception of the senses, namely the money vanished in front of the eyes of the manager. This is also the case in the third episode: the kidnapping of Christine.

The ghost makes her disappear on the stage in front of the public. As Raoul says, “I saw her vanish not by the glass, but in the glass...I thought it was an aberration of my senses, a mad dream” ([3], p. 184). “This is the illusion caused by the trick of the ghost who made the wall of mirrors swing round” ([3], p. 206). Most techniques and tricks used by the ghost when he is committing crimes are related to this kind of illusion.

Raoul and Persian are imprisoned in the torture chamber called the “palaces of Illusion” ([3], p. 228) when they were seeking Christine. This room “is lined entirely with mirrors” ([3], p. 228), showing exotic images of a foreign desert and forest by operating optical technology. The optical pathology in a closed chamber was also treated in Leroux’s other novel *The Mystery of the Yellow Room*, in which the insider and outsider cannot be easily identified. The same “cognitive disorder” is suggested in the confusion of the real and virtual in the “torture chamber”, a room in the cellar of the opera house because in it, there stands the iron guillotine, like a tree.

This chamber, compared to the “Grevin Museum”, famous for the collection of wax puppets and featuring historical scenes and people, operated by a technical apparatus, as the Persian explains: “We shall see how the scene thus obtained was twice altered instantaneously into two successive other scenes, by means of the automatic rotation of the drums or rollers in the corners. These were divided into three sections, fitting into the angles of the mirrors and each supporting a decorative scheme that came into sight as the roller revolved upon its axis” ([3], pp. 228–229).

The scenes in this chamber depicting a place called the jungle of Congo, with desert and forest alongside wild animals can be seen from the invisible window of the Louis Philippe’s room by drawing back curtains and putting out the light, as the ghost and Christine do. This reminds us of a kind of kino. The early techniques of the trick films at the end of 19th century seem to be reflected in the novel.

According to Benjamin, film represents the “unfolding result of all the forms of perception, the tempos and rhythms which lie performed in today’s machine” ([6], p. 394). And as such it is a fitting form for bringing kitsch images, that have in them “something stirring, useful, ultimately heartening” ([6], p. 396), near to the masses. It is just a developed form of galleries, exhibitions, posters, and propaganda that have begun using urban streets, arcades, and boulevards as their stage as Persian compares the images in the chamber to that of exhibition Benjamin points out the “colportage phenomenon of space” ([6], p. 418) replacing spaces by kitsch images.

The entanglement of foreign and familiar images and the rotation of historical styles are displayed in the bourgeois interiors and streets, in which the overlap of exotic and familiar images can be compared to the dream images that Freud defined as “Vexierbilder”. Urban spaces and facilities, such

as railroad stations, boulevards, arcades, museums, and so forth, are, according to Benjamin, saturated by dreams and dream images.³ The cityscape becomes a dreamscape. These dreams full of inexplicable images can be either a nightmare or reverie for the Parisian at the end of the 19th century in the “city of mirrors.”

“The asphalt of its roadways smooth as glass, and at the entrance to all bistros glass partitions. ... Even the eyes of passersby are veiled mirrors, and over that wide bed of the Seine, over Paris, the sky is spread out like the crystal mirror hanging over the drab beds in brothels” ([6], pp.537–538).

For Benjamin, Paris was a big mirror, on which the desires and fears of the Parisians, the dreaming collectives, was reflected. The mirrors in the torture chamber that offer “astounding spectacles that now appeared before his [Raoul’s] distracted gaze” ([3], p. 224) would also exemplify Benjamin’s diagnoses of the mirror-like metropolis. Regarding the semantics of the mirror, however, Gaston Leroux’s position seems to be ambivalent. The deception of senses and liquidation of memories caused by the mirrors are described as related to the criminal acts of the ghost and yet in the description, he is also definitely fascinated by the mirror phenomenon. The torture chamber seems to show the author’s sadistic impulse that is somehow related to making and abolishing the ongoing symbolic orders of metropolitan life.

The surrealist Aragon who also addressed the opera house in the *Paris peasant* (1926) influenced Benjamin’s concept of the dreamlike metropolis and its modern myths, claiming the deception of sense as unavoidable and positive: “I no longer wish to refrain from the error of my fingers, the error of my eyes. I know now that these errors are not just booby traps but curious paths leading towards a destination that they alone can reveal to me...New myths spring up beneath each step we take.” ([13], p. 10).

The request of the young generation for new senses and myths of modern metropolis questioned by the old generations could be said to be prefigured in the ghost of Leroux’s novel *Phantom of the Opera* (1911). The endangered traditional bourgeois borders are projected toward the figure of the ghost, who as engineer and trickster irritates them. Benjamin also suggested “the task of childhood: to bring the new world into symbolic space...Every childhood discovers these new images in order to incorporate them into the image stock of humanity” ([6], p. 390).

The ghost-image as produced from the gap of generations and classes can be considered as showing different reactions toward the drastic changes of metropolis. What is interesting to note however, is that, Erik is also the son of a bourgeois family. Hence, the figure of the ghost contains dialectical meaning. He is linked to the morbid bourgeois legacy, and he transgresses and irritates the bourgeois symbolic order. This is why the fate of the personified ghost, Erik, is not much different from Parisians insofar as he symbolizes a kind of negative subjectivity of the modern. Simultaneously, he contravenes the traditional borders and revitalizes them via his criminal acts that were most worried about but enjoyed as well in the narrative of the criminal story.

³ “Dream houses of the collective: arcades, winter gardens, panoramas, factories, wax museum, casino, railroad stations” ([6], p. 405).

4. The Ghost as an Abandoned Child

Erik appears as an asocial figure because of his ugliness concealed by the mask. He is described as “a man wrapped in a large cloak and wearing a mask that hid his whole face” ([3], p. 119). He appears rarely in the urban crowd in the novel. In fact, the only scene that shows Erik in the crowd is during “the masked ball.” The crowd at that masked ball can be viewed as a kind of variation of the urban crowd Benjamin and Kracauer have referred to. Indeed, Erik is stalking with the mask of red death through the “mad crowd” ([3], p. 92).

The masked ghost in the crowd can also be said to reflect “the bourgeois fear of anonymity” ([14], p. 172) on the streets and boulevards in Paris, where rag pickers, prostitutes, pimps, and hooligans roamed around freely. Erik is also suspected of being an “imposter” ([3], p. 100) from the start of the story. This kind of suspicion towards unknown others may be transferred to the carnival scene, in which the ghost first kidnaps Christine.

It is not a coincidence that the ghost becomes dangerous when his mask is removed. He warns Christine, “You are in no danger, so long as you do not touch the mask” ([3], p. 122). Benjamin and Kracauer point out this paradox of the urban crowd regarding the double meaning of the openness and concealment as shown in Poe’s “Purloined Letter”. In addition, the dual function of the mask can be highlighted. As a “living corpse” ([3], p. 261), Erik cannot connect without the mask in the society but with the mask, he can still remain within the society, unidentified and preserve his authenticity. Thus, with the mask he remains open yet anonymous.

This would be the paradox of the kitsch images that are not authentic but play the role of the supplement of any real images. Erik wants to be social with the mask, as he says to Christine, “Once, you could not look at my mask because you knew what was behind...And now you don’t mind looking at it and forget what is behind!...One can get used to everything...if one wishes” ([3], p. 226).

Kitsch images that replace the actuality are associated with lapses of memory. When they become accustomed to them, people forget what is behind them. Benjamin also assigns almost the same level of semantic importance to the image as to the body and highlights the entanglement of the real and virtual in his essay on surrealism. Fashion is also a good example for this phenomenon.

According to Wilson, “urban life was breaking down the rigid distinctions between the classes, to create a disorientating confusion as to who was who...The city was a spectacle, and in the right costume a woman—or a man—could escape into a new identity...To what extent individuals were really able to escape their origins is less certain, but undoubtedly many reformers believed that anonymity not only made it possible, but also presented an insidious challenge to law and order.” ([15], pp. 421–422).

In the carnival scene, the ghost calls himself “red death” ([3], p. 91). This has almost the same implication as the prostitute called “red whore”, that was “one of the most frightening spectres of urban life” ([15], p. 421). The adjective “red” seems to signify something dangerous or challenging in the anonym metropolis as the American Indian was called “peau rouge”. The problem of the asocial ghost correlates with the suspicious “red spectres” in the modern metropolis, in which the social integration, if not associations with distinct interests, have become impossible.

Regarding this social problem Benjamin highlights Engels’ diagnose of “the brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest becomes the more repellent and offensive, the more these individuals are crowded together within a limited space. (...) This isolation of the individual, this

narrow self-seeking, is the fundamental principle of our society everywhere.” ([6], p. 428). Kracauer also points out the “curse of individuation” ([16], p. 108) in the modern city, where mechanical associations rather than social bonds based on human relations rule—the result of the rational profanization, as was diagnosed in Kracauer’s comparison of the social semantics of the church with that of the hotel hall (see: [16], pp. 157–170).⁴

Erik’s social isolation is described as mainly due to his ugly appearance, not directly due to modern society in which indifference prevails but the rationalized social borders are expressed through the enclosed rooms, walls, and doors in the opera house, which are divided not only by their functions but also by the social prejudice of the criminal and wretched, as the trapdoor between the upper and lower part of the house shows. One of the secret passages from the upper part to the cellar used by the ghost is identified with the communist’s road used at the Paris commune.

The ghost “commands the walls, the doors and the trapdoors”. His voice penetrates the walls and doors without his having to show himself by any magical tricks. As we noted, he can make any one disappear. He seems to be the ruler of the functional and social borders in the house, manipulating them by way of his technique, which suggests that the ghost-like child featured in Benjamin’s *One Way Street* shows “an imaginative, magical engagement with the world of objects, which is antithetical to the insatiable avariciousness, calculating instrumentalism and cold estrangement of bourgeois adulthood” ([18], p. 102).

“Standing behind the doorway curtain, the child himself becomes something floating and white, a ghost. (...) And behind a door, he himself is the door—wears it as his heavy mask, and like a shaman will bewitch all those who unsuspectingly enter. (...) Magical experience becomes science. As its engineer, the child disenchanting the gloomy parental apartment and looks for Easter eggs” ([1], pp. 465–466).

The “disenchanting enchantment” of the bourgeois opera house is achieved by means of techniques and tricks employed by the “ghost” Erik.⁵

On the other hand, Erik is also caught between the gap of the social borders insofar as he wants to return to ordinary life⁶ through marriage with Christine. However, his distorted body and face make any ordinary life impossible, and his appearance may not be understood as only a representation of an individual character, but as a distorted social body and alien prohibited from transgressing the social borders incarnated in the criminal topology that is internalized in the cellar of the opera house, reflecting the fears and desires of the bourgeois middle class.

⁴ Mack highlighted a rigid opposition between Benjamin’s and Kracauer’s approaches ([17], p. 403) in the texts the two authors produced by the 1920s, especially *The Detective Roman* by Kracauer and *The Origin of Baroque Tragedy* by Benjamin. To understand Benjamin’s conceptions of the detective story and of kitsch imagery, we should also consider his writings in the 1930s, which will be seen to share ideas with Kracauer’s work.

⁵ In *One Way Street*, Benjamin featured the hiding child as the ghost-engineer. Because of Benjamin’s dedication to Lacis, “who as an engineer cut it through the author” ([1], p. 443), the engineer can be identified with her. But the semantics of the engineer is understood in a more general context (cf. [18], p. 104; [19], p. 48). I would suggest that the child as a ghost can be compared to the ghost, Erik, in Leroux’s novel.

⁶ “I’m sick and tired of having a forest and a torture-chamber in my house and of living like a mountebank, in a house with a false bottom!...I want to have a nice, quiet flat, with ordinary doors and windows and a wife inside it, like anybody else!” ([3], p. 225).

Only when Christine is mesmerized by his divine song does the door separating Erik from Christine open:

“It [his Don Juan Triumphant] intoxicated me; and I opened the door” ([3], p. 129).

The art as the profanized divine plays the role of the integration of society. However it turns out to be a mere dream. Paradoxically, awakening from this dream means for Christine not returning to reality but instead returning to a “nightmare”. Dream over dream or image over image is being overlapped and being engendered on the abyss of social borders. They can either be ephemeral bridges between the normal and the exceptional, ordinary and wretched, or they can deepen the abyss by strengthening the antagonism between social groups.

There is a complexity in the social role of kitsch images. The social and political position of G. Leroux represented in *The Phantom of the Opera* remain also vague, since Erik did not form any contra society or underground nation. In another novel *La double vie de Theopraste Longuet* (1904), however, Leroux created strange criminal tribes such as the “talpas”, “japistes”, and “grouilleurs” ([12], p. 186), based on gangs of real-life thieves and prowlers who met in the sewers, always at night, and represented the life of underground Paris (see: [12], p. 185). Like the ghost, these criminal tribes collectively represent the dark side of Parisian life and this image overlaps with those of strange tribes and regions beyond the borders of Paris, France, and Europe.

5. A Transnational Communicability and Sociability beyond Borders

One of Benjamin’s entries in *The Arcades Project* hints at the blurring of international borders and its entanglement with the desires and fears of urban dwellers: “According to a remark by Musset, the ‘East Indies’ begin at a point beyond the boundary of the boulevards. (Shouldn’t it be called instead the Far East?)” ([6], p. 438).

This citation from Kracauer’s book on Offenbach is significant because it hints at the transnational connections of the metropolis in the consciousness of its denizens. As previously mentioned, the life of the savages in the new world had been compared with that of the Parisians in popular novels of the time, and the outside of Europe was being viewed to correspond with the inside. The criminal topology, too, was, according to Kalifa, “decentered” ([12], p. 187) in this way.

As many entries in *The Arcades Project* illustrate, life in the metropolis was comparable to that of the new world with its many foreign tribes. This could be attributed to the influence of *The Last of the Mohicans* by James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851), a story portraying frontier and Indian life. These motifs were adopted in Alexandre Dumas’s (1802–1870) *Les Mohicans de Paris* (1854) and many epigones in which foreign tribes were compared to outsiders in metropolitan society: “Cooper’s savage in the middle of Paris! Is not the big city as mysterious as the forests of the new world? [...] Huron’s our lake of mud, Iroquois of the gutter” ([6], p. 441). Thus, in the popular *romans*, savages on the new continent and criminals in the metropolis have similar connotations. This can be connected to the concept of the similarity between primitive life and metropolitan as “a new, positive concept of barbarism” ([19], p. 44). The child metaphor of Benjamin can also be brought to convey this position.

From the conception of overlapping of borders—domestic and external—seems especially salient. This happens, particularly in *The Phantom of the Opera*, by means of a projection of the exotic images

of Asian monarchies onto the ghost, who was born into the Parisian middle class but was abandoned by his parents due to his ugly features. He was raised as an artist and a magician by gypsies and became well known by the caravans returning to Asia. As a result, he developed another career as political agent in the West Asian monarchies. “He took part calmly in a number of political assassinations; and he turned his diabolical inventive powers against the Emir of Afghanistan, who was at war with the Persian Empire. The Shah took a liking to him” ([3], p. 262).⁷

Erik’s career in Asia was ignored during the remaking of Leroux’s story for the stage, but it is important as an illustration of the foundation of the consciousness of the bourgeois towards the outside, in which the familiar and strange have merged and the borders between them have been blurred. At this time, Parisian space has also begun to “lose its substance and its supremacy” ([12], p. 187) due to the development of a modern transport and communication system. Kalifa explains this change as it manifests in the *Fantomas* books (original series, 1911–1913) written around the same time as *The Phantom of the Opera*.

“The whole *Fantomas* series illustrated this: the shift from a monocentric world toward a noticeable one. Telegraph, telephone, radio broadcasting, ocean liners, and transcontinental trains make *fantomas* a great traveler who visits such places as Scotland, Russia, Mexico, Colombia, and Natal. Paris was no longer the absolute focal point of dream.”([12], p. 187).

In the description of Erik’s various careers, the social boundaries inscribed on the ghost can be found overlapping with images of outsiders both within and outside Europe, reflecting the bourgeois’ fears and desires toward the unknown Other. In addition to the exotic and cruel images of the West Asian monarchies, the “yellow peril”⁸ of the time is revealed in Leroux’s description of the Japanese sailors as yellow dwarfs at the sea battle between Japanese and Russian fleets in the western sea of the Korean peninsula during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905.⁹

Erik’s yellow eyes, causing especially strong fears, and his strange career in Asia may be regarded in this light. The ghost has connotations—he is at once a divine, socially wretched, and geopolitical outsider, for example—that reflect and even create the desires and fears of the bourgeois toward the unknown Other in the end of nineteenth century.

The division of the Opera house through the trapdoor would be, in this sense, exactly the threshold between the profane and the divine, the normal and wretched, and the insider and outsider, amid the blurring of cultural, social and geopolitical borders. The narrower the gap between the spheres, the greater the fear and anxiety. What is at stake is coming to terms with the transgression of borders. The fears and desires that rise from the abyss between the spheres, can be overcome and tolerated by imposing new images over the old ones.

⁷ Benjamin point out the images of Asia in European detective stories: “Far more interesting than the Oriental landscapes in detective novels is that rank Orient inhabiting their interiors: The Persian carpet and the ottoman, the hanging lamp and the genuine dagger from the Caucasus. Behind the heavy, gathered Khilim tapestries, the master of the house has orgies with his share certificates, feel himself the eastern merchant, the indolent pasha in the caravanserai of otiose enchantment, until that dagger in its silver sling above the divan puts an end, one fine afternoon, to his siesta and himself.” ([1], p. 447).

⁸ It means, that non-white nationalities and ethnicities threaten to invade and conquer Caucasian lands (cf. [20], p. 79).

⁹ This reportage was published with the title “Les Heros de Chemulpo”, Paris 1904.

The popular novels like detective and criminal stories, have served this function, rendering fear enjoyable and reproducing the desire to go beyond the borders by creating kitsch images of the wretched and the outsiders. “The anesthesia of a fear through another one is his [the traveler’s] salvation” ([21], p. 381) says Benjamin recommending to buy and read detective stories, which give fictitious excitement when traveling by train through the railroad “cathedral of modernity” ([21], p. 381). This suggests how to come to terms with the modern fears and desires that emerge at the cultural and geopolitical thresholds.

In the *Phantom of the Opera*, Raoul is introduced as a member of expedition to the north pole. He and Christine leave for Scandinavia at the end of the story. As the protagonists traveling abroad shows, the metropolitan everydaylife was already closely involved in the entangling process of the transnational borders. It would not be a coincidence that Benjamin takes the costs of popular stories sold at railroad stations as the “offertory” of modern travelers to the gods of railroads.

Of course, the ambivalence of the image politic should not be overlooked in considering kitsch images in popular stories as a kind of antidote to regulate the bourgeois chaos resulting from the entanglement of borders. In fact, the fears and desires of the bourgeois middle class were misused as part of imperial and fascist politics, using antagonistic images. However, “Benjamin’s strategy of aiming at a dialectical use of kitsch had clearly singled out a worthy target for political intervention” ([10], p. 57) against this kind of negative image politics. Benjamin’s request to bring about a real state of exception and improve the position of those struggling against fascism can be understood culturally as a request for the dialectical use of images to overcome monologic and antagonistic kitsch images. The dialectical use can lead to a “profane illumination” as suggested in his essay “Surrealism” (1929) as a way in which proximity creates a new sense of estrangement, estrangement a new intimacy (cf. [18]).

From our view this dialectical process can be also understood as that of constructing a new communicability and sociability. In this regard, Benjamin’s diagnose of the time when the state of exception (*Ausnahme Zustand*) becomes the rule (cf. [22], p. 392) would not be so much different from addressing a potential to make a new community. It is not only related to the juridical context [23] but also to the images of everyday life¹⁰ in popular novels, newspapers, and so on, reflecting the socio-pathology of the collective facing the unknown outside. The dialectical process of employing the outside and including it as in- and outside takes place in the sphere of images as the foreign images appear entangled with that of metropolis in the *Phantom of the Opera*. Exactly in this sense, the image is an encounter and it is a category of communicability.

The ghost-image engendered in the process of the building of a transnational community marks a certain phase of the communicability in the past. It was standing on the borders of the In- and Outside. Namely the ghost as an “encounter with the shadow” ([9], p. 155) can be understood not only psychoanalytically but also geopolitically. It marked a historical moment, in which it could be recognized as such and constantly oscillated with the process of the entanglement of the borders.

¹⁰ Considering Benjamin’s concept of politics in terms of quotidian things, Menninghaus suggests that “Benjamin’s work on kitsch can serve as a powerful incentive to look into novel ways of writing history from below—from quotidian things and their affective significance and to design politics that pays sufficient attention to the fact that politics always relied on and played upon our emotions.” ([10], p. 57).

By “taking the outside” (*Aus-Nahme/ex-capere*) and overcoming the force of negative kitsch images through the process of doubling images over images, one could enhance one’s transnational competence to transgress cultural, social, ethnic, and national borders without incurring any antagonistic fears or desires. This would be the reason, then, to explain why the ghost “stalking abroad” ([3], p. 91)¹¹ has been so much fascinating as worrying for Parisians who felt already deeply involved in the process of transnational entanglement of the metropolis in fin de siècle Paris.

6. Conclusions

To better understand the implications of the entanglement of social and geopolitical borders in metropolis Paris at the end of the nineteenth century, Gaston Leroux’s novel *The Phantom of the Opera* and the ghost-Image in relation to the blurring borders by way of Benjamin’s methodological approaches to the urban landscape and images have been examined.

The fears and desires of the bourgeoisie are projected into the ghost that illustrates the endangered bourgeois symbolic order and simultaneously initiates a vital new metropolitan life. His actions seem to be crimes that transgress the moral and cognitional bourgeois order, but in fact, they reflect the blurring process of this old order at the end of the nineteenth century, and a need for a revitalization in the face of the huge changes to metropolitan life.

It is no coincidence that the ghost’s actions and history evoke the new phase of moral and cognitive modernity that most Parisians were experiencing. Kitsch images covering all spheres of everyday life, from art and fashion to architecture and film, are deeply related to new technologies and the new experiences of metropolitan life, supposed by Benjamin to be saturated by into the collective dream-images. Popular *romans* alongside the other arts were an important medium for and source of these images. In particular, in Leroux’s novel, the ghost-image as a kind of kitsch image is considered to be engendered in the historical process of encountering with the unknown others.

For the purpose of this paper, the overlapping of the strange and familiar images in the novel in terms of its communicability and sociability have been explored. This process is building a new community and it would also be a way to come to terms with the transnational unknown others to which the quotidian metropolitan life at the end of nineteenth century started to be more closely connected.

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Conflicts of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

¹¹ Erik’ says in the masked ball scene, “Don’t touch me. I’m Red Death stalking abroad” ([3], p. 91).

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