Wandering Star: The Image of the Constellation in Benjamin, Giedion and McLuhan[1]

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Walter Benjamin's notion of the "constellation" marks a particularly rich conjunction of the material, dialectical and religious impulses in his thought. Benjamin first developed the metaphor in the methodological prologue to his *Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1925), in which he famously states: "ideas are timeless constellations, and by virtue of the elements' being seen as points in such constellations, phenomena are subdivided and at the same time redeemed" (2009, p. 34). The image of the constellation reappears in Benjamin's study of 19th century Paris, the *Arcades Project*, where it also plays a pivotal conceptual function. While Benjamin was working on this project in the *Bibliothèque national* in Paris in the 1930's, he came to know Jewish historian Siegfried Giedion, who had recently published a book on modern French architecture: *Building in France – Building in Iron – Building in Ferroconcrete*. This was a text which Benjamin greatly admired, and which influenced his own investigations, leading him, for example, to reference Giedion's notion of the study of "anonymous" historical phenomena. Giedion himself was researching another history while at the *Bibliothèque national*, and like Benjamin's it also remained unfinished; this was his planned multivolume work on "the Emergence of Modern Man" (*die Entstehung des heutigen Menschen*).

It is well known that despite his efforts, Benjamin did not escape fascist Europe. Giedion on the other hand arrived in America in the late 1930's and was able use put his Parisian research to use in his book *Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History*. Significantly, the constellation (and other Benjaminian themes) reappear in the methodological introduction to this study of the history of industrial aesthetics. The task of the historian for Giedion is to "establish constellations" through a kind of atemporal lucidity; and this work, Giedeon explains, is "ever tied to the fragment [with] the known facts…scattered… like stars across the firmament" (1948, pp. 2-3). Such characterizations, in turn, find echoes in yet another programmatic opening to a text written by another admirer of Giedion's work in "anonymous history:" Marshall McLuhan. In his *Gutenberg Galaxy* McLuhan incorporates an astronomical term into its very title, a metaphor which McLuhan explains as follows: "…the galaxy or constellation of events upon which the present study concentrates is itself a mosaic of perpetually interacting forms that have undergone kaleidoscopic transformation– particularly in our own time" (1962, n.p.).

The purpose of this paper is to trace the metaphor of the constellation in the materialist modernism of Benjamin and Giedion to the more conservative theoretical constructions of McLuhan, viewing it as a kind of "travelling concept," as Mieke Bal has described: elastic ideas or metaphors, offering "sites of debate, awareness of difference and tentative exchange" (2002, p. 13). As Martin Jay points out, the metaphor of the constellation also travelled from Benjamin via Theodore Adorno to America and back to Europe, to re-emerge in Adorno's postwar writings while he was at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. As Jay explains, in the context of this exchange, the term signified "a juxtaposed rather than integrated cluster of changing elements that resist reduction to a common denominator, essential core, or generative first principle" (1984, pp. 14-15). These characteristics also generally apply to the term "constellation" as I consider it here. In the instance of travel that is my principle focus, Giedion serves as an indispensable conduit between Benjamin and McLuhan. This paper closes with a comparison of the implications of McLuhan's use of the constellation with those of Benjamin's earlier use of the term, and how it reflects the modernist historiography particular to each thinker.

[1] This chapter has benefitted greatly from input provided by Michael Darroch (University of Windsor) and Reto Geiser (Rice University).

Walter Benjamin (Berlin 1892 – Portbou1940)

Benjamin's challenge in his study of baroque tragedy is one that is later inherited, in a sense, by both Giedeon and McLuhan. This can be stated as a question: "How to bring the historical "phenomena," the obscure minutiae –whether of baroque drama, of industrial aesthetics or of print culture– into connection with something that is less ephemeral and of greater philosophical weight?" In this context, the basic significance of the constellation lies in its connecting or mediating power, in its potential to bring together material particularity with overarching notions or ideas, without reducing one to the other. Each historian, of course, expresses this function of this methodological image somewhat differently. In the original and most extensive exposition of the constellation as a conceptual tool –provided in the Epistemo-Critical Prologue (*Erkenntniskritische Vorrede*) to Benjamin's study of the baroque– minute historical "phenomena" are said to have the potential to be "redeemed." This occurs, Benjamin goes on to explain, when these phenomena are represented as *ideas* in the historian's work, and when they, through their configuration, gain a kind of "actuality:"

> The idea… belongs to a fundamentally different world from that which it apprehends. For phenomena are not incorporated in ideas. They are not contained in them… If ideas do not incorporate phenomena… then the question of how they are related to phenomena arises. The answer to this is: in the representation of phenomena… The set of concepts which assist in the representation of an idea lend it actuality *as such a configuration*. (2009, p. 34; emphasis added)

The idea, Benjamin indicates, needs to be prevented from dominating, eclipsing or incorporating the singular specificity of the historical phenomenon. The distance between the two –phenomenon and idea—is mediated and lent actuality in terms of their spatial configuration. The "significance" of the idea, Benjamin further explains, "can be illustrated with an analogy. Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars" (p. 34). Ideas are related to historical objects, in other words, in the way that points of light in the night sky resemble recognizable phenomena. It is their configuration, their spatial interrelationship, which allows for meaning and recognition.

In the fragments of his *Arcades Project*, this epistemological/critical metaphor takes a historical-materialist and dialectical turn, with the temporal and historical tensions at its core being both heightened and extended. Benjamin describes the mediating function of constellation or configuration in terms of discontinuous *dialectical* mediation, and emphasizes the abrupt, irruptive appearance of the constellation as a "dialectical image" that is "blasted out of the continuum of history:"

> It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with *the now* to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. (1999, p. 462)

The relationship of the elements of the past to the present is one that is actualized dialectically. But this dialectic is not a gradual process of recurrent synthesis; it is much more discontinuous and brittle; it is a dialectic whose interrelations and tensions are realized all at once, in a single moment, as if through the cessation of historical time, rather than through its continued unfolding. The historian's task, as a result, is not the work of antiquarian immersion or reconstruction, but the collection and juxtaposition of heterogeneous historical elements with one another and with *the now* of the author, the text and the reader. Benjamin saw this historical method as holding out the possibility of "redeeming" the myriad historical details and fragments that he was collecting and annotating while at the *Bibliotheque nationale.*

A number of these fragments are taken directly from Giedion's *Building in France*, a book which Benjamin described in his only extant letter to Giedion as having an "electrifying" effect: "I am studying in your book… You possess... radical knowledge… and therefore you are able to

illuminate, or rather to uncover, the tradition by observing the present" (Benjamin, as cited in Giorgias, 1998, p. 53). Among the 16-odd passages from *Building in France* that appear in Benjamin's *Arcades Projects* is one which describes "construction playing the role of the subconscious" in the 19th century, displaying both "individualistic and collectivist tendencies" (1999, p. 390). There is another which details, in its own obscure way, Gideon's notion of "anonymity" in history and the arts. Speaking of glass and metal in 19th century architecture as enabling "the intoxicated interpenetration of street and residence," Benjamin uses Giedion's text to underscore the anonymity of these novel forms: "the new architecture lets this interpenetration become sober reality. Giedion on occasion draws attention to this: 'A detail of anonymous engineering, a grade crossing, becomes an element in the architecture'" (p. 423). At yet another point, Benjamin refers to "anonymous art… [appearing] in family magazines and children's artbooks," connecting this reference with Giedion's particularly pregnant observation that "Whenever the nineteenth century feels itself to be unobserved, it grows bold" (p. 154).

Sigfried Giedeon (Prague 1888 – Zurich 1968)

A shared interest in urban architecture, aesthetics, 19th century history and anonymous designs are all manifest in these citations by Benjamin. Apart from the aforementioned letter and these references to Giedion in the *Arcades Project* –and the simultaneous presence of the two at the Bibliotheque national— there is hardly a word (in the printed record) explicitly connecting Benjamin and Giedion.[2] At the same time, it is clear there is no shortage of resonance between what Benjamin observes in Giedion, and what Giedion himself was working on at the time. As Dauss and Rehberg say of Giedion:

> The book project with the working title "The Emergence of modern Man" was to be about the effects of industrialization on the spirit [*Seelenleben*] of modern man. In the centre, as was the case with Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, stood the 19th century as the origin of modernity. (2009, p. 143; my translation)

Similar points of congruence are also evident in the case of *Mechanization Takes Command.* As Tyrus Miller says in his study of Benjamin and Giedion, Giedion's later claim in the introduction to this text

> to be writing the 'anonymous history' of the twentieth century bears close comparison to Benjamin's focus on the anonymous, collective dissemination of the arcade as a nineteenth-century architectural space. (2006, p. 240)

Indeed, overt references to "anonymous" cultural undertakings –in art, engineering or history—are a point of explicit commonality between Benjamin and Giedion, and as I shall later show, also in McLuhan. In an introductory section of *Mechanization takes Command* that is itself specifically titled "Anonymous History," Giedion writes:

> The meaning of history arises in the *uncovering* of relationships. That is why the writing of history has less to do with facts as such than with their relations. These relations will vary with the shifting point of view, for, like constellations of stars, they are ceaselessly in change. Every true historical image is based on relationship, appearing in the historian's choice

[2] One exception to this is that Giedion's name appears on a list of recipients drawn up by Benjamin to receive his 1936 anthology titled "*Deutsche Menschen*" –and possibly also his "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility" (Dauss & Rehberg, 2009, p. 143). On a related note, in a quasi-autobiographical text "on the ruling taste," Giedion himself characterizes some of his own research in Paris –and the eventual abandonment of his study of "modern man" for *Mechanization takes Command*—as follows: "The material for this [unfinished study] was gathered during the summer of 1936 in the *Bibliotheque National* in Paris. Then it was put aside, unused. In connection with an appointment in America it seemed to me more urgent to make some studies of the effect of mechanization upon our daily lives, through the power of the… ruling taste was misused in a way somewhat similar to art. This I tried to do in *Mechanization takes Command*." (1956, p. 14).

> from among the fullness of events, a choice that varies with the century and often with the decade, just as paintings differ in subject, technique, and psychic content. (1949, pp. 2-3; italics in the original)

This passage, together with the other introductory remarks on the historian's "construction of constellations out of scattered fragments" quoted above, are Giedion's only references to method and constellation in his study of mechanization. Despite the brevity of his references, the basic combination and interrelation of elements from Benjamin remain: historical objects, or Giedion's "facts" or "fragments" are "scattered… like stars across the firmament;" they acquire meaning through their relations, which are uncovered by the historian. Facts are significant only insofar as they are "represent[ed] as fragments" as Giedion puts it, and these representations are mediated in this sense by their relationships, forming a "historical image" that that according to Giedion, becomes apparent only when they are seen together.

At the same time, Giedion's references to the constellation metaphor register a number of figurative changes –changes that are subsequently retained in McLuhan's use of the trope. There is no reference in Giedion to a sudden, irruptive flash or cessation of motion, or a moment of possible "redemption." Instead, Giedion speaks of the "relations" between historical elements varying with the "shifting point of view" of the observer. There is also a notable ambivalence in Giedion's phrasing that suggests that constant and gradual alterations in these relationships are also expressive of historical change itself: "These relations," Giedion is also in effect saying, "are ceaselessly in change," with the historian's very choice of "facts… vary[ing] with the century and often with the decade." The observer's changing point of view and positional changes in the objects *being viewed* become difficult to disentangle. A similar ambivalence, together with a clear recognition of historical change as gradual, are all in evidence in McLuhan's description of the constellation –a description to which I now turn.

Marshall McLuhan (Winnipeg 1911 – Toronto 1980)

The first thing that is striking in McLuhan's writing is the influence of Giedon's notion of "anonymous history," particularly as a methodological heuristic. McLuhan and Giedion first met while McLuhan was working in St. Louis. And as biographer Philip Marchand explains, they remained in regular contact thereafter, with *Mechanization Takes Command* serving as a central reference point for McLuhan:

> Giedion's *Mechanization Takes Command*, published after McLuhan had left St. Louis, remained a resource for McLuhan throughout his career. In that book, Giedion examined a wide range of human objects –nineteenth-century bathroom fixtures, Marcel Duchamp's painting *Nude Descending a Staircase*, and a Chicago meat-packing plant – and demonstrated how they all reflected a single process, the increasing mechanization of human life. The book showed McLuhan how fundamental changes in technology affected all aspects of human existence and how any artifact, no matter how humble, could reveal clues to new patterns of life…. (1998, p. 78)

McLuhan wrote an enthusiastic book review of *Mechanization Takes Command,* appearing in the *Hudson Review* in 1949, some ten years after first meeting Giedion. Here McLuhan describes Giedion as providing readers above all with a new "set of tools." This figurative tool kit would then allow the reader, McLuhan indicates, to reach insights concerning the widest variety of aesthetic, historical and quotidian phenomena:

> [Giedion] makes very heavy demands of his readers since he presents ideas not as things to be known or argued about, but as tools with which the reader must work for many years. …And Giedion offers to him [the reader] a new set of tools for working not only with the materials of writing and the plastic arts, but with the entire range of daily object and actions. (1949, pp. 599, 601)

Later, in a 1968 essay titled "Environment as Programmed Happening," McLuhan quotes at length from precisely the section of *Mechanization Takes Command* which was quoted above, and which references both historical fragments and their configuration as mosaics or constellations: "This passage," as McLuhan asserts, "is a kind of a manifesto for a mosaic approach" which McLuhan considers his own, methodologically. Giedion's "'Anonymous History' approach," he continues, "accepts the entire world as an organized happening that is charged with luminous and exciting messages" To read the language of forms, anything from a Cadillac to an ash tray renders the book of the world an inexhaustible source of insights and discoveries (pp. 123-124).

This 1968 text, taken together with McLuhan's 1949 book review leave little doubt as to the deep and lasting impact of Giedion's "approach" on McLuhan's own work. It is not surprising that during the nearly 20 years that separate the review from McLuhan's "programmed happening" piece, the same set of metaphors would reappear in his first book-length historical study. Here is how McLuhan introduces his methodology for his own *Gutenberg Galaxy*.

> *The Gutenberg Galaxy* develops a mosaic or field approach to its problems. Such a mosaic image of numerous data and quotations in evidence offers the only practical means of revealing causal operations in history. The alternative procedure would be to offer a series of views of fixed relationships in pictorial space. Thus the galaxy or constellation of events upon which the present study concentrates is itself a mosaic of perpetually interacting forms that have undergone kaleidoscopic transformation—particularly in our own time. (1962, n.p.)

Like Giedion, McLuhan emphasizes not so much the meaningful if only momentary stasis afforded by a constellation, but its changes, or the "kaleidoscopic transformation" that it undergoes over historical time. However, in keeping with both Benjamin and Giedion, McLuhan utilizes the metaphoricity of the night sky to characterize the multiplicity of historical datum relevant to his study. Also, the discernment of this configuration (in this case, whether stable or "perpetually changing") is for McLuhan constitutive of the task of the historian. This astrophysical imagery is further developed in McLuhan's conclusion to the *Gutenberg Galaxy*, when he asks:

> What will be the new configurations of mechanisms and of literacy as these older forms of perception and judgment are interpenetrated by the new electric age? The new electric galaxy of events has already moved deeply into the Gutenberg galaxy. Even without collision, such coexistence of technologies and awareness brings trauma and tension to every living person…. (pp. 278-279)

Although the constellation as a configuration of quotidian historical details remains important here, McLuhan can also be seen as diverging significantly from Benjamin. Particularly McLuhan's references to "causal operations in history" and his invocation of galaxies, as ponderously colliding, together suggest a rather different metaphorical logic. Here, history here is decidedly (rather than ambivalently) portrayed as interrelated collisions, impacts or effects, interacting and cascading across vast times and spaces. This is obviously a long way from Benjamin's ideational representations being "redeemed" through their configuration or irruptive manifestation.

At the same time however, certain characteristics of McLuhan's description clearly diverge from Giedion's thinking, and (indirectly at least) present a sort of kinship with Benjamin. This is evident in McLuhan's explicit rejection of what he refers to as "the alternative procedure" of "offer[ing] a series of views of fixed relationships in pictorial space." McLuhan instead opts, as he says, for "a mosaic or field approach." Readers of McLuhan will recognize in this choice a familiar McLuhanesque move; one which leaves behind the analytic *visual* space of subject and object, and towards an all-inclusive and immersive *acoustic* space --a "sphere whose focus or center is simultaneously everywhere and whose margin is nowhere." Benjamin similarly refuses any easy or analytical separation of subject (the historian)

and object (historical phenomena). The flash he describes in which past "come[s] together with *the now* to form a constellation" occurs neither simply in the historian's or reader's perception nor exclusively in historical phenomena. Indeed, were it not for its explicit visuality and luminosity, this "flash" would not be out of place in McLuhan's privileged acoustic space of immersive simultaneity.

Conclusion: Redemption or *Ricorso?*

My point here of course, is not simply to play some academic version of "six degrees of separation." To return to the description of Mieke Bal, my point is instead to suggest the possibility of a type of travel of a metaphor or concept that is at once elastic and a site of a particular awareness. Indeed, despite all of the evidence suggesting otherwise, it may be that a shared awareness or sensibility, rather than an empirically traceable transmission process, is all that connects the use of the three instances of the constellation metaphor. If this is the case, it is clear that this shared awareness or orientation is a particularly *modernist* one. Juxtaposition and ironic counterposition across time and space are obviously modernist tropes: For both Benjamin and McLuhan, as for Elliot or Joyce, historical and quotidian phenomena –whether J. Alfred Prufrock's peach or Stephen Daedalus' ashplant– gain significance through their implied or explicit juxtaposition with historical or even mythical referents. The realization of such a collocation requires the intersection of otherwise disparate spaces and times. For Benjamin, of course, this counterposition and redemption of phenomena is discontinuous and irruptive. The eschatology of Benjamin is one in which history does not *lead to* the realization of a particular meaning but is constantly shot through with it. For Giedion, it is gradual, and for McLuhan it is additionally also cyclical: Disparate phenomena and times are brought together not through compression into a dialectical image, but through the grand *ricorso*, Vico's notion of historical repetition. This is mirrored in one of McLuhan's favourite texts, *Finnegan's Wake*, which begins by continuing the sentence with which it ends. This cyclical structure is perhaps also echoed in McLuhan's own *Gutenberg Galaxy*, which begins with the methodological reflections with which it also ends.

Given that Benjamin's collected writings appeared in 1999, and that the McLuhan archival fonds have been carefully and repeatedly inspected, explicit confirmation of a link between these distinctive but resonant historiographies certainly requires further investigation. Indeed, such a connection may well lie with Giedion: His notion "anonymous history" has been shown here to have been explicitly embraced by both Benjamin and McLuhan; his "transatlantic exchange" is a matter of increasing scholarly interest (e.g., Geiser, 2010); and he seems well-placed to bridge the prescient pessimism of Benjamin with McLuhan's faithful optimism.

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