

**A
Ficto-
Historical
Theory**

of the London Underground

Marko Jobst

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Illustrations by Nic Clear

Contents

P.5

Introduction

P.13

Hypnos, Eros

P.25

Object

P.55

Space

P.89

Image

P.117

Movement

P.149

Machia

P.157

Nic Clear: A note on Underground Drawings

Bibliography

Acknowledgments

This book addresses the London Underground in the context of architectural histories and theories. It aims to indicate that the subterranean transportation system of London, the first of its kind in the world, remains largely unacknowledged in architectural writing with regard to a number of issues: the status of the Underground station as a novel building type, which is essentially different to that of the railway station; the emergence of modernist approaches to space, manifest on the Underground in an unprecedented form of interiority; a perspectival regime that forecloses the horizon within an interior that corresponds to no immediate, inhabitable context; and the question of movement that brings together the built environment, the technologies of transportation, and the techniques of the body in a highly specific conjunction.

It employs a mode of writing that combines fictional storytelling with a theoretical essay. It is written in the first person as a series of research entries and theoretical interpretations offered by an unnamed

narrator to his reader in a didactic, yet intimate tone. As the narrative unfolds, the narrator and his reader are revealed to be rewriting and subverting the myth of the labyrinth: instead of a modern-day Ariadne, it is the Theseus-like figure of the perpetual outsider who provides the coil of knowledge and challenges his reader to perform the *tauromachia* her/himself.

The historical, theoretical and philosophical sources used in the interpretation of the Underground form the main body of this one-sided epistolary exchange. The sources are related in a way that suggests first-hand experiences of the research material and familiarity with the authors whose work the narrator discusses. The authors are introduced as the narrator's former educators, colleagues or acquaintances; some of the material is related as recollections of conversations with the authors, some as exchanges of letters, other sources merely as experiences of reading. The historical, theoretical and philosophical material is thus rendered inextricable from the circumstances of research and the experience of the city and its architecture – in particular, that symbolic temple to research, The British Library – drawing attention to the immanent conditions of the production of thought, while questioning the authority and dissemination of knowledge

proper to academic discourse. All instances of direct speech couched within the narrator's discourse represent quotes from the original texts and are, as such, referenced.

Each author is given a distinct presence, rather than being folded into a wider network of inherited propositions supporting the book's 'argument'. This distinct identity awarded to the sources of historical and theoretical material used – made manifest by turning them into fictional characters – is intended to emphasise their position in relation to the text, whose insights can never be fully explained away by the discursive contributions of the sources used. More often than not, the book's fictional narrator positions himself against, rather than alongside his sources, even as he builds on their propositions and 'steals' from them.

Another key aspect is the question of the writerly voice. This is a term routinely employed in literary fiction and creative writing, less so in theory. In its most common manifestation, theory is prone to erasing the voice of the author, or emphasising and bracketing their subjectivity. While theorists can be in possession of distinct styles of thinking (rhythm of articulation, progression of ideas) and can therefore manifest a distinct communicative mode, they

do not imply the construction of a deliberate, fictitious voice. A Gilles Deleuze of *Difference and Repetition* is a different one to the Deleuze of *Cinema 2: The Time-image*, even if a certain style of thinking and quest for philosophical concepts connects these works across the years that separate them; but it is only in the deliberate move into cross-subjectivity and, importantly, *fictionalisation* of the styles of thought particular to 'Gilles Deleuze' and 'Felix Guattari' that a distinct voice is created in full, and actively employed in the work of the philosopher and his collaborator, as they indicate in the opening lines of *A Thousand Plateaus*.

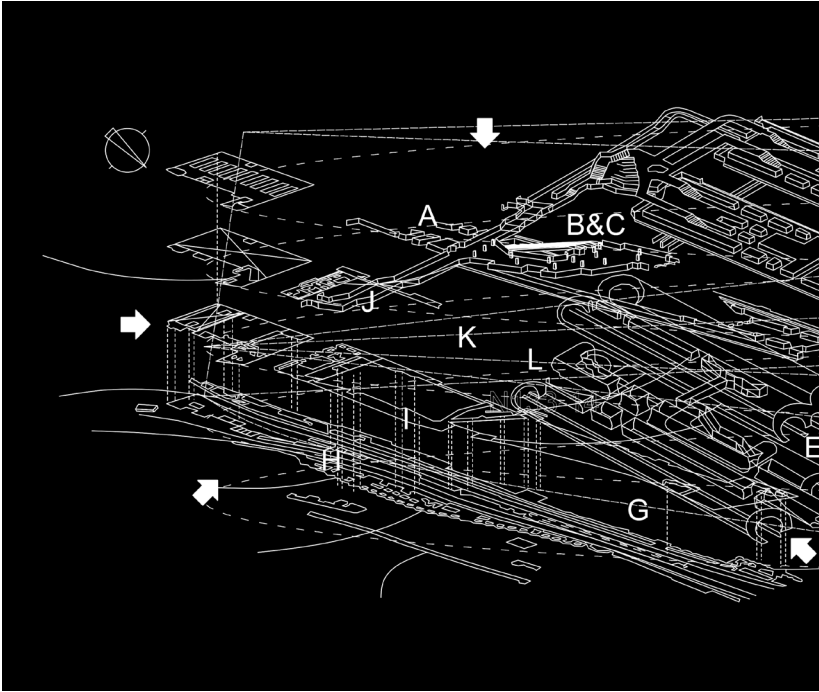
What would this book have looked like had it been written as a 'standard' work of research, however elastic the definition of the term? Every theme embodied in the four main chapters would have been extended and further sources consulted, situating the Underground within the broader histories of modernity in architecture. As indicated by the end of this particular narrative journey, the ambition is to see the Underground as a unique coming together of some of the key aspects of the discourses of architectural theory, yet show that it subverts its basic premises. On the other hand, as a novel, i.e. a standard work of literary fiction, the book would have needed to pursue the so-called

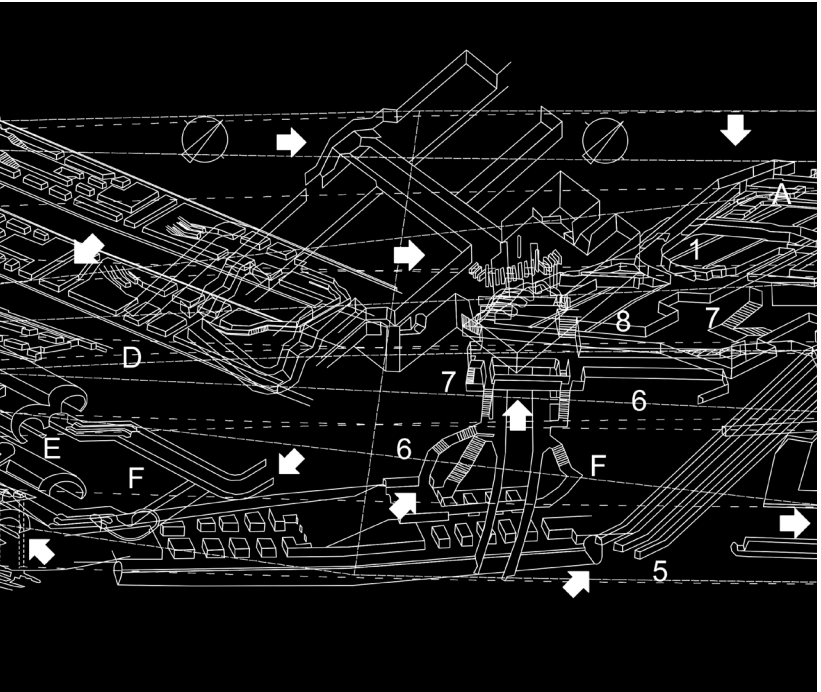
'character-development' by transforming propositions into a narrative experience of its protagonist's journey first and foremost, and burying the research in it, in order to allow the trajectory of the story to come more extensively to the fore. As such, the book remains suspended between these two poles, risking unsatisfaction on both fronts. The key question for its 'author' (Marko Jobst), therefore, was one of the *effects* the reading produces. In what way is it worth the space and time it demands of the reader, compact as it is? It is here, perhaps, that the question of its genre might offer a map for the reader, should they feel the need for one. Otherwise, they can judge it through the way it makes them think, or doesn't.

What would the term *ficto-historicism*, inherent in the book's title, presuppose? Such a not-as-yet-existent genre takes for its main reference point *ficto-criticism*, yet pulls away from the notion of critique, stressing the historical aspects of the material instead. It indicates that the resulting mode, or genre, of writing should be understood to base its theoretical propositions primarily in the realms of history and fiction, rather than the traditions of critical theory. But the 'creation' of the genre of *ficto-criticism* is also intended as a provocation: it questions the extent to which modes of writing conducted in the

context of academic research require formulations of clearly defined and carefully contextualised writing practices – categorically sound, justified in the context of theory (architectural or other) and clearly positioned within the archives of the grand edifice of knowledge.

In this sense, the opening quote from an early text by Deleuze provides, perhaps, the best indication of the nature of this book's writerly practice.





Hypnos, Eros

Behind the eyes.

'But I suppose the main way I coped with it at the time was to see the history of philosophy as a sort of buggery or (it comes to the same thing) immaculate conception. I saw myself as taking an author from behind and giving him a child that would be his own offspring, yet monstrous. It was really important for it to be his own child, because the author had to actually say all I had him saying. But the child was bound to be monstrous too, because it resulted from all sorts of shifting, slipping, dislocations, and hidden emissions that I really enjoyed.' (Deleuze, 1995: 6)

Now open.

The first one was called the Metropolitan. It was just a line connecting two points, and the year was 1863. Eight days earlier, further to the west, Abraham Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation; 13 days later, to the east, Poland, Lithuania and Belarus will rise against Russia. But on January 9, between Paddington and Farringdon Street, a stretch of an underground railway opened, the first cutting gesture in the construction of a world that would reconfigure London, gathering the forces of economy and politics, incorporating the flows of bodies and machinery, permanently altering the city to include this

other London, simultaneously part of it and infinitely removed from it. No one realised it at the time, and few are aware of it still, but this was when a new conception of architecture was ushered in by the back door. Its ramifications are only beginning to be felt now, today, as I write to you from The British Library.

There are two people sitting next to me, and three on the opposite side of this table. The room is silent, peculiarly so, considering it is filled with what seem to be hundreds. They come here to consult their sources, the authorities they've inherited. They venerate and defer. But they cast occasional glances at each other as well, they sigh and stretch their backs. They eat secretly under the tables. Then they train their eyes on paper again, pursue the signs that mark the page. And they write: they produce more words to add to the literary towers already erected, like the one at the centre of this building, a totemic presence with overtones of Babel. They knew their references when they designed this place. Who are they, you might wonder? But don't ask me, this is your city, and your father's. Ask him instead, unless it's too late and your betrayal is written all over your face.

As I write this, you are taking a journey on the Underground. You never leave it, not until I enter the