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Video Games in a Time of War

A Conversation with Stanley Greenberg

The (Non)Destinations of Augmented Reality Art

THE HIGH LINE:
Monument to Modern Ruin

"History breaks down into images, not into stories."
—Walter Benjamin, *Passagenwerk*

The City of New York has a new public space. The High Line is an eight-block stretch of defunct elevated train track remade into a public park that opened in June 2009. This renewed, reclaimed ruin embodies several key moments in modernity: the steam engine, the public promenade, the flâneur, the arcade, and the cinema—as articulated by Walter Benjamin. Effectively, the High Line functions as a monument to the ruins of modernity. However, as a contemporary site designed by savvy architects, the High Line is neither a simple representation of modern forms nor a replay of a nineteenth-century monument—one that claims permanence while articulating a triumph inevitably passed. Presenting a scripted urban imaginary, the High Line suspends visitors in a state of collapsed time and space organized into cinematic images—one that invites them to reflect on the collective experience of the metropolis.

The High Line runs along Manhattan's West Side near the Hudson River, currently reaching from Gansevoort Street in the Meatpacking District to 34th Street in Chelsea. Designed by James Corner Field Operations with Diller, Scofidio & Renfro, the track has been transformed into an elevated urban park, a sculpted path that meanders slightly through buildings along 10th Avenue. The High Line was built in the 1930s to enable efficient delivery of goods to and from industrial businesses and to prevent accidents with street-level traffic. Mail, milk, poultry, and automobiles could be loaded and unloaded directly into buildings that opened onto the track. This freight-only line was known as "The Life Line of New York." Out of use by 1980, it was abandoned until 1999, when The Friends of the High Line began campaigning to develop the elevated land into a public park.

Today, walking up the stairs to the three-story-high space, the visitor enters a magical zone. Immediately lifted from the drudgery, dinge, and chaos of the city streets, one ascends to wild landscaping, fresh views, wooden benches, strolling citizens, and buildings parting to make a path. The Standard Hotel towers over the southern stretch—a magnificent relic of International Style architecture. Slits in the irregular concrete ground transition into selectively preserved stretches of train track that serve as plant beds. It is a disorienting, yet strangely harmonious blend of industrial decay and ever developing city, of nostalgia and innovation.

The landscaping is especially uncanny as grasses, flowers, and small trees fill gaps in what remains of the tracks. "Keep it wild, keep on the path" signs instruct passersby, as if the landscaping were indigenous, happenstance. The grasses and flowers look suspiciously like weeds, but perfectly arranged and tended to. This celebration of a once seamy and neglected space artfully finesses the effect of dereliction, giving way to a safely sanitized experiential pleasure. The ruin is renovated.

TRAIN

If one could choose a primary icon for modernity it might be the steam engine. The invention of the steam engine introduced unprecedented speed and efficiency to the movement of goods and people during the nineteenth century, thus enabling industrial capitalism—the distribution of consumer goods produced by industrialized labor—and tourism. According to Marx, "the key aspects of modernity were the dramatic changes in consciousness brought about by the industrialized space and time—the 'annihilation of space by time.'"[1]

Trains of all types were a mainstay at the World's Fair exhibitions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, celebrating the spirit of technological innovation. This progression of train exhibits, including steam engines, diesel trains, and elevated subway trains, culminated in the use of monorails during the 1962 and 1964 World's Fairs. Today, a monorail is the centerpiece of Disney World's Epcot Center Future World.

In the American popular imaginary the site of urban train tracks has a rich presence. It is where hobos and drifters find freedom. People lament their lower-class identification with "the other side of the tracks." Movies have taken advantage of the romance and danger of this unmonitored space, as in Gus Van Sant's *Paranoid Park* (2007), in which an inadvertent murder is committed by a troubled teen while "train hopping." And it is in the train yard of the New York City subway that talented graffiti artists of the 1980s practiced their illicit urban art at the dawn of the city's cultural renewal. Now, as commercial development and consumer culture have colonized virtually every corner of Manhattan, and post-September 11 security ensures that every space is monitored, the site of the train tracks is mostly an urban fantasy. The train itself is no longer Manhattan's "Life Line," but only a residue of its industrial past.

BOULEVARD

The High Line, as a public space, is reminiscent of a nineteenth-century Parisian boulevard on a Sunday afternoon. The bourgeois crowds stroll along unhurriedly—the famous New York City pace absent—taking in the views of the city and one another. The High Line is clearly a space of leisure.

Like some modern urban spaces, as in Benjamin's Naples, The High Line is a site of public performance. It enables a porous relationship between performance and architecture—one of "porosity."[2] In a multimedia slideshow, Bill Cunningham, the *New York Times*'s roving street-fashion photographer, celebrates, "the most extraordinary fashion promenade you can imagine." Another *New York Times* slideshow of people on the High Line is called "Life as a Runway, in the Park, 30 Feet Up." Guerilla torch singers and banjo players take advantage of a captive audience from the fire

escape of a residence recently lifted from obscurity by its chance proximity to the new park. Their fire escape is known as the "High Line Park Renegade Cabaret."[3]

FLÂNEUR

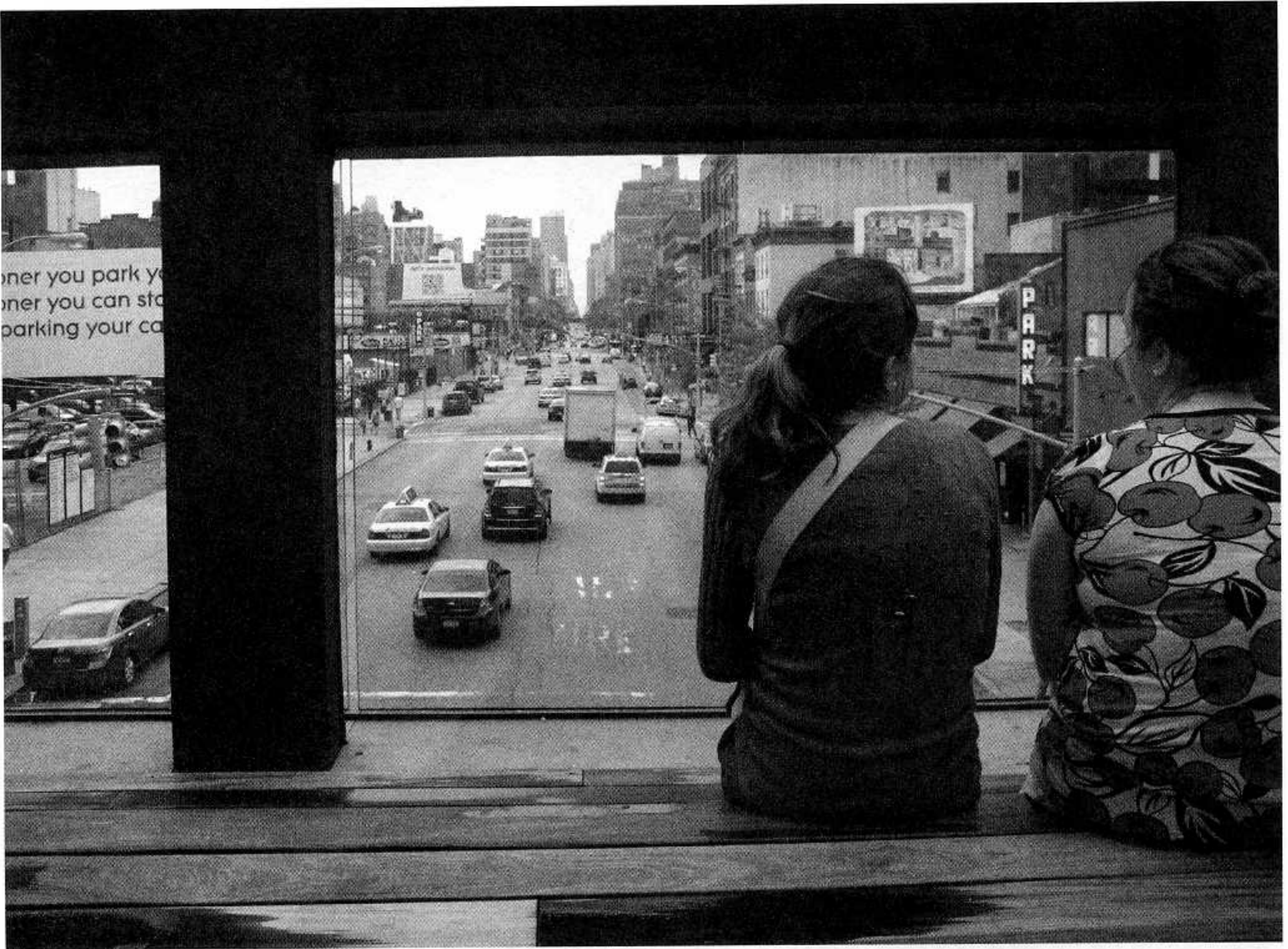
The leisurely visitor might imagine himself or herself the figure of the flâneur—the nineteenth-century free agent described by Charles Baudelaire and Benjamin, strolling idly through the city, simultaneously of the crowd and detached from it, a mobile bourgeois observer. The person strolling down the High Line fulfills Benjamin's description of the flâneur quite literally, as he or she "goes botanizing on the asphalt,"[4] past shrubs and flowers, people, architecture, and urban views. However, unadulterated flâneurie is not possible here. According to David Clarke, "the flâneur's existence was built upon the sustained disavowal of the cognitive ordering of space, in favour of a self-defined and self-centered aesthetic spacing."[5] The highly delineated structure of the High Line thwarts this disavowal, and the flâneur must succumb to the scripted trajectory. The persona of Baudelaire and Benjamin's flâneur thrives on the unexpected. As an observer roaming about at will—especially at night and sometimes through the bowels of the city—he encounters gritty scenes and unseemly nightlife. The High Line experience is free from anything resembling an urban underworld. Gambling, women offering their amorous services, and activities dirty or dangerous are not to be found, despite the neighborhood's seedy history.

Limited entrances to the High Line, an early nighttime closure, and the long list of "don'ts" posted at each entry point—"Park rules prohibit: walking on rail tracks, gravel or plants . . . solicitation; commercial activity, except by permit . . . drinking alcohol, except in designated areas . . ."— render this a space free of unheimlich presences. The High Line's strictly delineated boundary makes it less an urban territory to explore than an experience of moving among the crowd at a hyper-real train ride.

ARCADE

As a contained space for pedestrians in an urban zone rich with commerce, the High Line resembles an arcade—the covered shopping centers of nineteenth-century Paris that were, according to Benjamin, "the original temple of commodity capitalism."[6] Like the arcade, the High Line is "privatized public space."[7] But the High Line is an arcade *en plein-air.* Rather than enclosed by iron and glass, the High Line looks outward toward the iron and glass architecture of the city. The IAC world headquarters, a building by Frank Gehry,

All images
The High Line (2010) by Rachel Stevens



gleams to the northwest with its curvilinear façade made of twisted glass plate panels, a contemporary homage to the Crystal Palace. If the arcade capitalizes on interiority—a "bourgeoisification of space," a separation from street life—the High Line capitalizes on the confusion between interiority and exteriority.

The High Line looms above two neighborhoods rife with high-toned bourgeois commerce: the Meatpacking District and Chelsea. High-end fashion flagship stores, fancy wine bars, European-themed restaurants appealing to the aspirational "bridge and tunnel" crowd, and designer hotels with fantastic views fill the Meatpacking District. Luxurious loft-style condos and a bloated commercial gallery scene occupy Chelsea. The neighborhoods are a hotbed of commodity exchange.

Both neighborhoods rely on the mystique of their industrial past for their romantic appeal: the once desolate neighborhoods were the site of segregated slaughter—where actual meatpacking could remain hidden, a haven for sex clubs and clandestine gay cruising on the nearby decaying docks, a site for a busy trade in transgender prostitution, and a place where artists occupied cheap lofts. The persistent aura in these neighborhoods recalls an earlier New York City in which industry occupied significantly more of the landscape and a more recent postindustrial New York rich with neglected real estate. Curiously still called "the Meatpacking District," the more southern neighborhood hosts only a few meatpacking hold-outs, their dumpsters of animal parts emptying into renderer's trucks and an ever-present stench providing color for the Standard Hotel. Alas, in the ever-changing landscape of the city these neighborhoods are already in decline. The glittering flagship designer stores belie the fact that the recession has been working its rot into the current capitalist system.

The arcade as an architectural structure was once the height of technological innovation, emblematic of the more utopian facets of modernity. By the time Benjamin turned his focus onto them in the twentieth century they were already passé. For Benjamin, arcades are "far flung ruins and debris" of the nineteenth century.[8] Arcades were sites for the exchange of phantasmagoric commodities, wish-images. The commodities sold in the arcades were "souvenirs" or "Andenken." As Anne Friedberg writes, "*Andenken* translates as souvenir, but also as memory; memory was the commodity-fetish retailed in the passage."[9] The arcade, or passage, is to Benjamin "a city, a world in miniature."[10]

The High Line is a live evocation of the arcades at their peak, full of urban strollers and an example of celebrated contemporary architectural design, but it also fulfills the function of a reliquary. From here, fragments of the cityscape can function as commodity wish-images, a "world in miniature," or rather, a city in miniature

presented as views—the past and the present collapsed together in material surfaces and structures. At close range, preserved sections of train track and weed-like landscaping function as a nostalgic display, as in a natural history museum diorama. Images of the city framed by the High Line, resembling postcards, are souvenirs as well—a kind of cinematic urban commodity. Visitors make photographs to take away, the cityscape becoming, through photography, "fragmentary, transitory object[s]."[11]

The High Line draws a significant amount of its appeal from both its proximity to high-end specialty commerce and the aesthetics of its derelict industrial past. As an example of cutting-edge urban design, it jives seamlessly with the tastes of people who partake in both the nearby fashion and art commerce. However, it is void of opportunities for commerce itself. Only one vendor, chosen by the authorities, is allowed on the High Line for one week at a time. As commercial art galleries close and designer flagship stores stubbornly remain open, the High Line offers a reprieve from the spectacle of commodity consumption. For Benjamin, "[the commodity] was the fragment that held the key to, and disclosed the totality of, the modern cultural forms."[12] It is appropriate, therefore, that this exposed arcade literally built on top of these neighborhoods, yet virtually free of commerce itself, functions as a monument to the phantasmagoria of modern consumption.

CINEMATIC METROPOLIS

On the High Line, the visitor's experience of the metropolis—beyond a brief encounter with a sampling of other city dwellers—is primarily a visual one, a series of carefully framed views. Organized not so much as a gathering place, the High Line is a platform for gazing outward. In a culture habituated to the mediated views offered by television and other telecommunication technologies, these iconic and sometimes panoramic real-time views of the city are easily transformed into cinematic images of an American metropolis.

Scenes framed by both the choices of architects and the location of the High Line offer a comprehensive cross section of the urban imaginary. Views into back lots once accessible only to utility and delivery trucks—never seen except as a fictional setting for a drug deal, gang encounter or mob hit—are now visible to all. Gazing south, one sees a framed view of the Hudson River as it opens into the harbor, featuring the Statue of Liberty as a small but recognizable figurine. The view echoes a typical establishing shot. When Cunningham saw a tall ship in full sail going down the river from the High Line he thought, "if this were Hollywood they couldn't invent it." One could easily imagine the Titanic in the tall ship's place, the quintessential image of bourgeois technological prowess on a journey toward its demise.

The Standard Hotel, with its smooth, shiny surface, provides a noir example of the urban genre. Its windows reveal nudity, pornography film shoots, couples having sex, and other views (as reported by the *New York Post*) occasionally available to the accidental voyeur strolling below. The long brick façade of an industrial warehouse, complete with cracked safety glass bricked up from within, runs along one northwest edge. The decaying brick surface retains its romantic urban appeal, but at this height is stripped of any sense of isolation or fear that an abandoned industrial location typically invokes. Opposite the brick wall, toward the east, is a view of the jagged city skyline. A parade of tall buildings is interrupted by long views of streets full of cars, people, advertisements, trees, and more buildings. The chaos of the metropolis is safely surveyed from on high as an analog for the collective city.

Just north are three billboards visible at close range and eye level. Though larger than life and a little surprising at such proximity, these displays blend into the narrative of the city as a site of commerce. "Today," writes Benjamin, "the most real, mercantile gaze into the heart of things is the advertisement. It tears down the stage upon which contemplation moved, and all but hits us between the eyes with things as a car, growing to gigantic proportions, careens at us out of a film screen."[13]

At a safe remove, the flow of traffic is represented as something cinematic. An amphitheater of steps that mimics such architecture provides seating and allows the visitor to descend below the surface of the High Line. Framed explicitly by the architects with a large picture window at the bottom is a view of 10th Avenue—the taillights of taxis, trucks, and other vehicles are experienced as a moving image. Even the flow of the Hudson has been given an electronic glimmer by artist Spencer Finch—rendering it as a kind of digital screen. The artist sampled colors from the moving water with seven hundred photographs taken over a single day for his piece called *The River That Flows Both Ways* (2007)—a long wall made up of seven hundred small, rectilinear panes of glass. This stained glass window, a grid of green and gray pixels, is a kind of abstract screen that glows with light from within.

MONUMENT

Benjamin decried the "self-aggrandizing" nineteenth-century monuments that attempt to appear timeless as "idols erected by the modern bourgeoisie after their own image" whose meaning eventually changes albeit unintentionally. To Benjamin, the monument is ultimately "a transient rather than an enduring structure. Its significance is not fixed and final but is subject to political changes in the present, to transformation and ruination."[14] As a monument, the High Line does not claim to be "fixed and final"; it is not singular, totalizing, or forever married to a political moment, but embraces ruination and looks outward to an ever-changing city, one that stimulates memory and whose images play stories of cities at large.

The city itself is "a mnemonic device . . . Like the *mémoire involontaire*, it interweaves forgetting and remembering."[15] While Freud uses the city as an analogy for memory, Benjamin finds the development and existence of the city inseparable from the process of memory itself. "Consistently, the concrete analogy that Freud proposes to render this paradoxical mechanism of overlap, delay and preservation is the city," writes Max Pensky.[16] Examining more closely these two understandings of the city and memory, Pensky concludes they are the same, as "the metropolis

can only signify the structure of collective experience and collective memory by virtue of the fact that in some sense it is the same structure."[17]

Our contemporary condition of experiencing the world through telecommunication technologies has been so thoroughly assimilated that views of the city from the High Line read as mediated images. Paul Virilio reminds us of Benjamin's claim that the proliferation of mechanical reproduction, architecture, and cinema are in symbiotic relationship and "[present] material to a collective reception."[18] To Virilio, television is "an introverted window, one which no longer opens onto adjoining space, but instead faces beyond the perceptible horizon."[19] Screens "displace doors and the physical means of communication, because cinematic representation has already displaced the reality of the effective presence, the real presence of people and things."[20] From the High Line, images of the city read as cinema, doubling back on themselves and invoking a city elsewhere. Slavoj Žižek offers a rich example of the confusion experienced by New Yorkers regarding the reality of their own city in his discussion of a more spectacular ruin, the World Trade Towers on September 11, asking, "Was not the often repeated footage of the frightened people running towards the camera, the giant cloud of dust from the collapsing tower behind them, reminiscent of spectacular disaster movies? A special effect to outdo all others?"[21]

The High Line, as an idyllic and liberating space by the train tracks, is in part a social imaginary—"a collective memory of an event or place that never occurred, but is built anyway."[22] As a hyper-real manifestation of the metropolis, the High Line and its views mask its history but, in so doing, remind us of what is not present. As Norman Klein explains in *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (1997), the social imaginary is "a built environment that also contains an evacuation. It is charming, because in part it erases."[23] He continues: "The hyper-real edge announces how false; it is fashioned out of a sensation of difference, of a *lost* memory. The object can be touched, but it stands in for what is off the map. Simulation is not a copy, but a blur between memory and signifier."[24] In this way the High Line functions as a postmodern monument.

Friedberg's conception of Benjamin's "vision of modernity" as "the new, the already obsolescent, the ever-same" is also essential to what she calls her "description of postmodern temporality."[25] This vision, as well as its confusing status as simultaneously modern and postmodern suits the experience of the High Line. As a continuous present fused with a continuous past and future that cannot quite be categorized, the High Line, as a monument, thwarts "the myth of historical closure"[26] that Benjamin considers to be so problematic.

The High Line proper is a monument to a ruin of mighty industry, but the High Line as an experience is organized more broadly around memory and our collective perceptual encounters with the city. Ultimately, the High Line memorializes the shifts in perception that modernity has fully affected. Its surfaces, disintegrating material fragments, and cinematic views are an allegory of the media-saturated capitalist metropolis—one that both counters and proliferates the myth of utopian progress.

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NOTES **1**. *Anne Friedberg,* Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern *(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 55.* **2**. *Walter Benjamin cited by Graeme Gilloch,* Myth & Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City *(Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Publishers with Blackwell Press, 1996), 30.* **3**. *Penelope Green, "'West Side Story' Amid the Laundry,"* New York Times, *June 25, 2009, Web; www.nytimes.com/2009/06/25/garden/25seen.html (accessed December 6, 2009).* **4**. *Walter Benjamin. "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire, Part II The Flâneur" in* Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 3, 1935–1938, *eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 19.* **5**. *David B. Clarke, "Introduction: Previewing the Cinematic City," in ed. David B. Clarke,* The Cinematic City *(New York: Routledge, 1997), 4.* **6**. *Walter Benjamin cited by Susan Buck-Morss,* The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project *(Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 83.* **7**. *Friedberg, 35.* **8**. *Walter Benjamin cited by Friedberg, 48.* **9**. *Friedberg, 49.* **10**. *Walter Benjamin,* The Arcades Project, *trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1999), 32.* **11**. *Buck-Morss, 160.* **12**. *Gilloch, 118.* **13**. *Walter Benjamin, "These Surfaces for Rent" in* The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media, *eds. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 173.* **14**. *Gilloch, 73.* **15**. *Ibid., 76.* **16**. *Max Pensky, "Memory, Catastrophe, Destruction: Walter Benjamin's Urban Renewal" in* City *9, no. 2 (July 2005), Web (accessed November 10, 2009).* **17**. *Pensky, 208.* **18**. *Benjamin cited by Paul Virilio, "Improbable Architecture," in* The Lost Dimension *(Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 1991), 69.* **19**. *Virilio, 79.* **20**. *Ibid., 99.* **21**. *Slavoj Žižek, "A Holiday From History," included with the DVD* dial h-i-s-t-o-r-y *by Johan Grimonprez (New York: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2003), 2.* **22**. *Norman Klein,* The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory *(New York: Verso, 1997), 10.* **23**. *Ibid., 10.* **24**. *Ibid., 12.* **25**. *Friedberg, 91.* **26**. *Gilloch, 107.*