"GLITTERING MYRIADS OF MEN": H. G. WELLS'S SPECULATIVE NATURALISM AND THE LATE-VICTORIAN URBAN SUBLIME

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This paper interprets Herbert George Wells's early science-fiction novels as instances of the Late-Victorian urban sublime. The argument suggests that Wells's works bring into play three strands of the rhetoric of terror and wonder — the oceanic, the gothic, and the neo-classical. Wells depicts cities as boundless fields defying representation, as breeding grounds for evolutionary monsters, or as spectacles of grandeur triggering the elevation of the soul. The paper examines two issues raised by these idioms. First, it examines how Wells's recourse to the sublime leads us to rethink his status within nineteenth-century urban fiction and British literary naturalism. Secondly, the paper evaluates the impact of the sublime on Wells's politics. One wonders indeed how urban sublimity relates to Wells's elitist brand of socialism, and how the politics of the sublime determine Wells's status as a naturalist author.

1. "[G]littering myriads of men": Sublime Cities of the Present and Future

Though H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* is ostensibly concerned with extraterrestrial invasion, its action climax does not involve the presence of Martians. The novel's greatest commotion occurs instead when the narrator's brother, accompanied by two ladies, reaches the Great North Road at Barnet (Wells's London geography is painstakingly meticulous) and seeks to cross the "boiling stream of people" fleeing the capital devastated by the Martians (90). From a distance, the crowd "roa[rs] like a fire" (90). The refugees form "a tumultuous stream of dirty, hurrying people" acting as a violent, indistinct mass: they have "merged their individuality […] in a receding multitude" (91). Over several pages, we learn how the narrator's brother and his companions are "swept forward by the stream" (95), and, once immersed in it, "lose volition" and "become part of [the] dusty

rout" (95). After crossing Chipping Barnet in this "indescribable […] din and confusion (95), they break free of the human stream and seek shelter in a side road. The Barnet incident is the most spectacular of several crowd scenes in Wells's Martian-invasion novel. It reveals to what extent the English novelist uses a science-fiction premise in order to make visible the spread of mass urbanization. In particular, *The War of the Worlds* depicts urban populations whose social bond is fashioned by new technologies: the movements of the fleeing masses are triggered by the headlines of newspaper reports; the crowds move around by means of the train services connecting the metropolis's suburbs.

Crowds in a technologically reshaped environment are also a major feature of Wells's *When the Sleeper Wakes*. In this novel, Graham, a late-nineteenth-century insomniac, falls into a trance of two hundred years. He wakes up to discover that the compound interest on his estate has made him the majority shareholder of a dictatorial oligarchy — the Council — ruling over a society characterized by mass urbanization. Village and country life have disappeared, only megalopolises and leisure resorts called Pleasure Cities have survived while the London megacity shelters under a sky dome. Multiple crowds inhabit this world — street crowds, revolutionary masses, speculators, merry dancers, laborers. Graham's first experience of this world occurs as he catches a glimpse of the twenty-second-century "[m]oving [w]ays" (26) — three-hundred-feet-wide mechanical sidewalks cutting across London's "overwhelming architecture" (26). The complex walkways, with swiftly traveling side lanes and a motionless center, accommodate "an innumerable and wonderfully diversified multitude of people" (27). Their "motion dazzl[es] [Graham's] mind" (26). Crowds in motion also dominate the long description of the Sleeper's immersion into "a congested mass" of protesters hunted down by the security forces of the oligarchy's Council. For more than a chapter, Graham is carried along by a "multitude […] beating time with their feet" (57). His transit through the "glittering myriads of men" (59) and his flight to safety occur in an atmosphere of mental confusion making it hard for Graham to convince himself that "the whirl of [the crowd's] movement" (58) is "no dream" (68).

The urban masses evoked above qualify as oceanic crowds: they are characterized by great size and motion and reside in locales large enough to justify comparisons to streams and floods. A different portrayal of urban

populations informs Wells's *The Time Machine,* as well as a few passages of *When the Sleeper Wakes* not addressed above. London in the year 802.701, as the Time Traveller of *The Time Machine* discovers it, consists of two contrasted realms. Its "Upperworld" (48) is graced with magnificent yet decaying buildings of monumental size, and is inhabited by bands of "pretty little people" (21) — the "Eloi" (46). These childish, undersized hedonists live in fear of the city's "Underworld" (48) — a network of deep shafts and galleries peopled with creatures resembling "white lemurs" (48) with "lidless, pinkish-grey eyes" (50). To the Time Traveller, the Morlocks, as these Underworld denizens are called (50), seem "nauseatingly inhuman": their bodies display the "half-bleached colour of the worms and things one sees preserved in spirit in a zoological museum" (46). Yet like the Eloi, they are evolutionary avatars of nineteenth-century humankind. The "exquisite creatures" (21) of the Upperworld are the descendants of the leisure classes, while the Morlocks are the offspring of the working classes. The latter, by the evolution of industry, have "lost [their] birthright in the sky" (44), and been "cut off from the natural surface of the earth" (44). In an allegory of the class struggle, they hunt down the Eloi at night and eat them. Wells provides no extensive depiction of the Morlocks' underground city. Instead, his impressionistic approach maximizes the text's gothic intensities: through the protagonist's eyes, we are given frightening glimpses of shafts, galleries, and machine rooms engulfed in darkness. The twenty-second-century society of *When the Sleeper Wakes* has its own "[u]nder [s]ide" too (158). The middle and upper-class world of the London megalopolis owe their prosperity to a toiling underclass characterized by "pale features, lean limbs, disfigurement and degradation" (161). These laborers live among "giant machines […] plunged in gloom" (159). Deprived of any attractive feature that might gain them acceptance among the pleasure-seeking crowds above, they form "a distinct class, with a moral and physical difference of its own—even a dialect of its own" (159). The gothic denizens of the "[u]nder [s]ide" therefore embody an early stage in the social evolution leading from the nineteenth-century proletariat to the Morlocks.

In the passages above, Wells resorts to the rhetoric of the urban sublime: he depicts future and present cities as objects of fascination and terror. In this paper I wish to examine to what extent Wells's handling of the rhetoric of terror and wonder leads us to re-examine the significance of his works

of anticipation. The corpus for this argument includes three scientific romances — *The Time Machine*, *The War of the World*, and *When the Sleeper Wakes*, as well as Wells's essay *A Modern Utopia*. I shall first develop a few general reflections on the urban sublime as a cultural phenomenon and an academic concept. These introductory remarks are the more useful as Wells's scientific romances do not mobilize one single strand of urban sublimity. Instead, they play several variants against one another. The passages above interweave at least two strands of the urban sublime: oceanic metaphors evoking the city's magnitude and urban gothic stirring accents of abject dehumanization. Secondly, I wish to investigate whether Wells's portrayal of "overwhelming" cities may help us re-evaluate his position within British urban naturalism. Finally, we will examine to what extent the urban sublime empowers or subverts the political agenda ostensibly developed out in Wells's scientific anticipation. To this purpose, we must determine how the affects-laden visions of disaster elaborated by the scientific romances fit in with the rational depictions of advanced societies appearing in late-nineteenth-century utopian writings, including Wells's own *A Modern Utopia*.

2. A Short Genealogy of the Urban Sublime

The rhetoric of sublimity in the representation of urban space has been the object of a fairly small and recent academic corpus. This body of literature can, however, be broadened by factoring in essays examining discourses cognate to the urban experience — studies of the "industrial," the "technological," even the "[n]uclear" sublime (Burtinsky 3; Nye, *American* 2; Ferguson 4).[1] Initial references to urban sublimity focused on architecture and urban planning, emphasizing the overwhelming power of built space. In his history of English architecture, Nikolaus Pevsner mentions the fascination and dread exerted by Victorian buildings — a phenomenon Nicholas Taylor calls the "[a]wful [s]ublimity of the Victorian [c]ity" (Taylor 431; also Walker 138). Similar reflections have been elaborated about skyscrapers and twentieth-century urban development.[2] Because this architectural concept of the urban sublime is concerned with visual excess as an embodiment of terrifying power, it fits the principles developed in one of the most

1 See also Marx (195) and Wilson (231) for discussions of the technological sublime.

2 See Kingwell (51); Nye ("Sublime" 257) and Lynch (2) for analyses of the sublime in modernist and postmodernist architecture and urban planning.

often-quoted essays on terror and wonder — Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. Inspired by Hellenistic critic Longinus' treatise *On the Sublime*, Burke defines sublimity as "whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever […] operates in a manner analogous to terror" (4). Cities fit Burke's criteria by their great size and their capacity to accommodate populations alienated and impoverished to the point of uncanniness.

Fredric Jameson's mid-1980s reflections on postmodernism opened new avenues of research for the urban sublime. Jameson argues that the technologically mediated social bonds of postmodernity are too vast to be amenable to representation. This "impossible totality" is therefore an object of sublime affects, comparable to the emotions inspired by nature under Romanticism (35; see also Tabbi 11–13). Jameson's remarks are significant firstly because they delineate a history of the rhetoric of terror and wonder in which the urban sublime stands as an intermediary stage between nature Romanticism and the postmodern concern for the sublimity of discourse and technology. Secondly, Jameson makes the sublimity of the social landscape an issue of discursive representation, not solely of visual magnificence and power. His approach is therefore comparable to postmodernist philosopher Jean-François Lyotard's reflections on the Kantian sublime. Kant's concept of sublimity, Lyotard indicates, is concerned with the dynamics of cognitive processes (*Leçons* 18–21). For Kant, the sublime arises whenever reason produces an idea of infinity that cannot be objectified by understanding and imagination: the mind struggles with a concept of "absolute totality" with which it cannot catch up (Kant 119). On this basis, Lyotard views the Kantian sublime as the philosophical template for the epistemological crisis of postmodernity, which confronts subjects with an overwhelming proliferation of discourses (*Postmoderne* 18–19). In light of Kant, Jameson, and Lyotard, the metropolis embodies the (post)modern crisis of representation in the materiality of built-up space: it is the visible token of the resistance to representation caused by complex social interconnections.

The remarks above imply that urban sublimity originated from what Carol Berstein, in an analysis of nineteenth-century British fiction, calls the "transfer" of sublime affects "from a natural to an urban […] scene" (174). We have seen above that the transposition of the sublime from one

landscape to the other informs Jameson's narrative of postmodernist urban aesthetics. It is also a key premise of Tanya Agathocleous's study of urban realism, of Kirsten Jensen and Bartholomew F. Bland's catalogue for the 2013 *Industrial Sublime* exhibition at the Hudson River Museum in New York, and of my earlier studies of the urban sublime in American culture (Agathocleous 104; Jensen and Bland ix, 11; Den Tandt *Urban* 5–8*;* "Masses" 127; see also McKinsey 139). The corpus most often invoked in order to illustrate this shift in the object of sublimity includes Charles Dickens's *Sketches by Boz* (1836), Edgar Allan Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" (1840), and Charles Baudelaire's sketches of the Paris *flâneur*, especially as the latter are channeled through Walter Benjamin's reflections on nineteenth century Paris. Benjamin's analysis of Baudelaire's urban prose indeed makes him the third most often quoted theoretical reference for the urban sublime besides Burke and Kant. Poststructuralist and neo-Marxist scholars turn to him in when trying to identify the political affects triggered by city crowds in the early stages of urban consumerism.

I believe, however, that a more complex narrative of the development of the sublime across the nineteenth century is in order. We must factor in the existence of a moment of transition between nature Romanticism and late-nineteenth-century urban novels. In British and American fiction after Romanticism, the human environment initially depicted as sublime was often not the metropolis but industry. This industrial sublime is the keynote of the important corpus Sheila Smith calls the "'Condition of England' novels" — Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, and Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil, Or the Two Nations* (Smith xv). Smith designates thereby the texts in which the social consequences of the Industrial Revolution were first brought into the compass of literary representation. The High-Victorian industrial sublime differs from its late-nineteenth-century naturalist offshoot because it does not necessarily focus on huge metropolises: mill towns of the high Victorian age were not always large. Even when industrial fictions take place in major urban centers — Gaskell's Milton-Northern is a fictional equivalent of Manchester — their emphasis does not lie on urban magnitude but on the hellish spectacle of industrial plants, machines, and industrial violence. Also, taking the industrial sublime into account makes it possible to address texts that enjoy a marginal status in the genealogy of urban sublimity because

of their moment of publication, setting, or genre characteristics. Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, for instance, deploys sublime tropes for the depiction of whaling as an industrial activity. Rebecca Harding Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills" offers a sublime depiction of industrial plants anticipating Emile Zola's *Germinal* or Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* by several decades. In English letters, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* — sometimes depicted as the first SF novel — deserves the same re-evaluation in so far as it stirs fascination for technological processes that later acquired industrial significance.

Across the nineteenth century, the gothic component of the urban sublime boasts a more substantial history than either the oceanic or industrial variants of urban sublimity. Urban gothic is concerned with impoverished city-dwellers, the uncanny local aspects of urban settings, and the city's opaque power structure. This brand of the gothic was a well-established subgenre in American literature in the early and mid-nineteenth century through works such as Charles Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn* and Herman Melville's *Pierre*. In Britain, condition-of-England novels intertwine the gothic and the industrial sublime in the portrayal of proletarian life. Dickens, in works such as *Oliver Twist* (1838) and *Hard Times*, is the prominent practitioner of this discourse. At the time of Wells's early career, British urban gothic experienced spectacular success with works such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories. Evidently, urban gothic was a mainstay of nineteenth-century popular fiction. Some of its key texts were serialized popular narratives ("feuilletons," "penny dreadfuls" and "dime novels") such as Eugene Sue's *The Mysteries of Paris*, George William MacArthur Reynolds's *The Mysteries of London*, and George Lippard's *The Quaker City* in the US. Though Wells's position in the literary market lies outside the scope of this essay, it is worth noting that the author of *The Time Machine*, as he created figures such as the Morlocks, appropriated for the sake of sociologically relevant novels the sensationalistic commercialism of popular romances.

Finally, Wells's predominantly pessimistic romances also display moments of utopian enthusiasm, and therefore occasionally resort to a variety of the rhetoric of sublimity absent from late-nineteenth-century naturalist urban novels. We might call this discourse the neo-classical sublime, distinguishing it from the romantic variety evoked in Burke and Kant.

Recent scholarship on the sublime has been predominantly Burkean: it privileges the terrifying dimension of awe, and views sublime terror as a Romantic antecedent of postmodern ontological dislocation. Yet in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, critical responses to the French and English translations of Longinus were not primarily concerned with fear. Instead, French neo-classical poet and critic Nicolas Boileau, as well as British essayists John Dennis and John Baillie, associated the sublime with grandeur, exaltation, and the elevation of the soul. We may therefore delineate alongside Burke's and Kant's dichotomized characterizations of the beautiful and the sublime a borderline area that fits the neo-classical concept of aesthetic and moral elevation. The discourse thus defined takes for its object, as John Baillie puts it, whatever "raises the mind to fits of greatness" (Section I). Its precariousness may be gauged by Baillie's realization that sublimity is not necessarily linked to virtue: conquerors acting as "immense monster[s]" are sublime too (Section IV). Yet for the most part, Baillie's and his predecessors' comments on Longinus define an aesthetic attitude concerned with extreme magnificence just beyond the border of beauty. In Burkean terms, the neo-classical sublime takes wonder as its main focus, and de-emphasizes terror. The neo-classical sublime may also be used as a transhistorical label fitting works published later than the mid-eighteenth-century. It is indeed a significant component of the literature of sociological anticipation portraying the supreme achievements of future human societies. In this, the neoclassical fascination for grandeur marks the thrill of an optimistically perceived future. Its most visible expression is the urban architecture of utopian cities. Early practitioners of SF like Wells could not envisage the evolution of humankind otherwise than as an enhanced version of awe-inspiring late-Victorian urban planning and industry. This aesthetics of the grandiose would later inform space-opera comics such as *Gordon Flash* or superhero series such as *Superman*.

3. Wells's Speculative Naturalism

Wells's handling of the urban sublime is an index of his relation to literary naturalism. In my previous discussions of American naturalism, I have pointed out that the post-romantic discourse of the sublime is the literary feature by which naturalist novelists signal both their ambition and their

inability to provide a totalizing documentary chart of the urban scene (Den Tandt, *Urban* 31–36; "American" 110; "Masses" 131). This reading of the naturalist sublime takes its cue from Jameson and Lyotard. It suggests that the sublime rhetoric of excess and extreme defamiliarization stakes out the limit of what can be achieved by the methods of documentary investigation. Naturalist texts switch to oceanic or gothic tropes when they address social realities the analytical discourse of documentary realism cannot bring into focus — crowds, networks of speculation and exchange, or poverty and alienation. Therefore, naturalist texts are characterized by a pattern of dialogization whereby documentary components interact with romantic and gothic intensities. The interpretation of naturalist fiction — and notably the analysis of its politics — revolves around the evaluation of this pattern of dialogization.

The above argument is transposable to various national traditions and to modes of writing beyond the classic naturalism derived from Emile Zola. In these pages, we must determine how this dialogized concept of naturalism applies to British literary history and, specifically, to the literature of sociological anticipation. The former task proves difficult if we focus on what we might call programmatic naturalism — a well-demarcated movement with explicit principles. Nineteenth-century British writers were more diffident of literary labels than their continental counterparts. As of the 1850s, French writers set up avant-garde groups, each boasting its manifesto. Realism was one of the first of these avant-gardes and its tenets were set out in Louis Edmond Duranty's periodical *Réalisme*. Such programmatic clarity was unavailable in Britain, though a considerable amount of realistic writing was produced there. Ian Watt and Lilian Furst have indicated that the English novel, as of the eighteenth century, was predicated on an implicit endorsement of the realist mode (Watt 34; Furst viii, 10, 23). If the contours of British realism prove sketchy, British literary naturalism is even more elusive. The British writers whose works display naturalist features — George Gissing, George Moore, and Thomas Hardy — did not cohere into a literary circle comparable to Zola's. A more substantial naturalist movement did develop in drama around George Bernard Shaw and John Galsworthy. Yet this makes for a scattered corpus compared to naturalist literary production in France, Scandinavia, and the US.

We can make a stronger case for British naturalism, however, if we disregard programmatic consistency and broaden both the discursive features and literary-historical spread of the genre. Zola's essay "The Experimental Novel" is often read as a validation for the scientifically informed mimetic realism the French novelist favored himself. Yet the practice Zola champions could be widened in order to include discourses tackling social conditions through strategies different from novelistic mimesis. Literary journalism and sociologically oriented reportage should be added to the naturalist corpus. Historians of naturalism have pointed out the affinities of nonfiction works with the naturalist project (Wilson 36–39). Many naturalist authors practiced journalism and nonfiction — particularly essayistic nonfiction with a sociological import — alongside their novelistic activities. Their nonfiction work is contiguous in terms of purpose, if not discursive verisimilitude, with their novels. Similarly, the utopian (or dystopian) genre deserves to be bundled with naturalism. Utopian (dystopian) texts — made popular by Edward Bellamy, William Morris, William Dean Howells, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Wells himself — are sociologically-focused fictions in a format relying on essayistic arguments. Wells's scientific romances could therefore be described as instances of speculative naturalism. This term, coined by analogy with the more recent SF label speculative fiction, does justice to the fact that Wells develops sociological and biological reflections in the displaced, indirect fashion required by the literature of anticipation. British literary naturalism would be spectacularly enriched by this new classification: it would rank among its greatest achievements naturalist romances such as Wells's *The Time Machine* and *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, as well as Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Its precursor, as indicated above, would be Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. By the same token D. H. Lawrence's major novels, with their discussions of evolutionary and civilizational topics, might be viewed no longer as modernist works but as later manifestations of a broadened naturalism.

Speculative naturalism in Wells's scientific romances manifests itself in the first place in the novelist's thematics, which echo the concerns of sociologically focused turn-of-the-twentieth-century literature. I have suggested that the sociological payload of *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds* does not reside primarily in the SF topic advertised in their titles — time travel and extraterrestrial invasion. Wells's focus, as in *The Island*

of Dr. Moreau, is instead how evolutionary theory applies to populations. As such, his descriptions of the Morlocks and the Martians prolong in the mode of quasi-documentary anticipation the literary-scientific experiment Zola depicted as the object of naturalism. Wells's sociological reflections are also pursued through allegories. We have seen that *The Time Machine* is concerned with class difference and *The War of the Worlds* with crowds. The two novels also deal with a social anxiety prominent at the turn of the twentieth century — overcivilization. This term designates the fear that Victorian men might surrender to a feminized culture (Lears 223; Den Tandt, "Amazons" 639). They may therefore become unable to engage in the struggle pitting humans against nature, and, perhaps more worryingly, the contest opposing the middle and upper classes against a militant proletariat. Fear of overcivilization is patent in *The Time Machine*'s depiction of the Eloi, who are reduced to decorative dolls. That they are gendered feminine is visible, first, in the charming features of the ill-fated Weena, the narrator's Eloi companion, who dies in a fire fleeing from the Morlocks. Secondly, according to an even more negative gender stereotype, the Eloi are feminized in their futile daily activities and their treacherousness. Overcivilization in *The War of the Worlds* is represented both explicitly and metaphorically. It is explicit in characters lacking the moral fiber to face the Martians. Mrs. Elphinstone, whom the narrator's brother encounters in his flight from London, clings to the privileges of upper-middle-class womanhood—notably on the help of her absent husband George — in a situation that cannot sustain them. When she realizes her plight, she collapses psychologically, "too wretched even to call upon 'George'" (95). In a more subtle fashion, even the ostensibly formidable Martians are metaphors of unmanly sophistication. Wells's technologically advanced extraterrestrials are bodiless "heads — merely heads" (119). Their repellent feeding mechanism — lacking a digestive system, they ingest human blood — is proper to creatures who have renounced physicality. Symptomatically, these overcivilized technophiles are defeated by creatures far lower on the evolutionary scale — Terran bacteria.

Wells's speculative naturalism sets up dialogical interactions among the quasi-naturalistic idioms I mentioned above — sociologically focused fiction and nonfiction —, as well as with the urban sublime. If we disregard the frame narrative set in contemporary London, *The Time Machine*

amounts to a dialogue between the neo-classical and gothic sublime. We have seen above that the Morlocks' underworld is a realm of urban gothic. On the other hand, the Eloi's surface city is sublime in the neo-classical sense of the term: it is made up of "an abundance of splendid buildings" among "clustering thickets of evergreens" and "blossom-laden trees" (36). Set up by the descendants of nineteenth-century Britons, these imposing structures have fallen into "a condition of ruinous splendor" (25). They form a grandiose necropolis bathed in nostalgia. The value of this erstwhile radiant city is determined by its hidden netherworld: it lives in fear of its gothic counter-image, which stands as the repressed embodiment of the social violence that made the building of the Eloi's world possible.

Dialogical interplay in *The War of the World* involves a higher number of components than in Wells's time-traveling fable. The Martian novel features, on the one hand, the realistic portrayal of London under attack and, on the other, several varieties of the sublime from the oceanic to the gothic and the neo-classical. Contrary to *The Time Machine*, Wells's extra-terrestrial invasion narrative is set entirely in the London present, depicted with astonishing documentary accuracy. The narrator's cool-headed invasion exposé stands out in contrast with the sublime crowd scenes analyzed above. Scientific detachment also abruptly shifts into what we might call metaphorical variants of the oceanic sublime — elements evoking sublime crowds by connotation. *The War of the World* displays several of these: the "black smoke" used by the Martians as a chemical weapon; the Martian "red weed" unwittingly transported to Earth by the invaders; and, finally, the swarm of "putrefactive and disease bacteria" that kill off both the Martians and the red weed (81, 121, 161). The black smoke is an "inky vapour, coiling and pouring" across the landscape in a "huge ebony cumulous cloud" (81). Its "pungent wisps" spell "death to all that breathes" (81). The weed produces "red-coloured growths" spreading "with astonishing vigour and luxuriance" from the impact point of the Martian projectiles "throughout the country" (121–22). Feeding upon the rivers, it creates "Titanic water-fronds" emitting a "violet-purple fluorescent glow" (139, 155). These passages, mingling the oceanic and the gothic, evoke entities characterized by uncontrollable spread and the capacity to smother and engulf. They are therefore metaphorical vehicles of Wells's crowds and contribute to the thematics of the erasure of selfhood and civilization itself.

The neo-classical sublime manifests itself in *The War of the World* respectively in the necropolitan depiction of "[d]ead London" after the attack (Wells, *War* 156) and in the portrayal of the Martians' technology, in particular the robotic "handling machine" (118). Devastated and deserted, London becomes a "city of the dead" (*War* 158). Scarred by the black smoke and the red weed, it is reminiscent both of the Eloi's decaying realm in *The Time Machine* and, more distantly, of the eerie necropolis world of James Thomson's "The City of Dreadful Night": dead London "gaze[s]" at the narrator "spectrally" (Wells, *War* 160). Its "desertion" and "stillness" diminish its potential for terror and invite a response tilting toward wonder. The description of the handling machine, on the other hand, is one of the most enigmatic moments of the novel. The Martians' contraption is "an extraordinary glittering mechanism" resembling "a metallic spider" (117). It transgresses the boundary of the animate and the inanimate: "[i]ts motion [is] so swift and complex, and perfect that at first [the narrator does] not see it as a machine" (117). Controlled directly by the living head of a Martian with which it forms a compound being, the handling machine has a "living quality" (117). In part, the passage qualifies as an outstanding instance of the technological sublime. In our classification, the handling machine is an object of the neo-classical sublime because it inspires more admiration than fear. From a Marxist perspective, the scene offers a splendid illustration of what Georg Lukács calls reification: it spuriously attributes lifelike features to aspects of social life that were created by human (or, at least, animate) beings. That the handling machine fosters reification is even more evident from the fact that it produces other machines. The passage thereby evokes the threat of a self-sustaining non-human world — a realm made up of what Jean Baudrillard calls "simulacra" (11). In this, the sublime depiction of the handling machine corroborates the suggestion that the allegorical discourse of *The War of the World* is concerned with the disappearance of human agency, either by dissolution into the communal being of the crowd or by technological supersession.

The Politics of Wells's Urban Sublime

There is admittedly a paradox in the contention that the romance idiom of the sublime contributes to speculative naturalism and therefore retains the sociological acumen and the political orientation of the literary practice de-

fined by Zola. Longinus himself argues that the sublime does not properly "persuade" its audience (Longin 74); instead, it "ravishes" and "transports" them in ways that starkly differ from "persuading" (74). Accordingly, Francis Goyet, the editor of Nicolas Boileau's translation of *On the Sublime*, indicates that Longinus relies on the distinction between two functions of discourse regarded as incompatible in ancient rhetoric—"*docere*" (to teach) and "*movere*" (to overwhelm) (14; emphasis in the original). If so, the position of the sublime at the opposite end of understanding raises a political issue. The literature of socialism, to which Wells is linked, has consistently favored rational realism, which constitutes the cognitive foundation of critical political economy. Sensationalism in this perspective amounts to covert complicity with capitalist commercialism. The *Schwämerei* of romanticism and romance is a tool of political manipulation because it neutralizes rational analysis and glamorizes social exploitation. This argument was developed in Marx's own reflections on literature — notably in his remarks on Sue's *The Mysteries of Paris* — and in most later Marxist criticism. Its most extended formulation appears in Georg Lukács's essays on realism. Lukács contends that realism, which he regards as the aesthetic of the Left, counteracts reification — the strategy by which capitalist culture constructs a mystified image of the social world (*Historical* 205; *History* 110–40). Alan Trachtenberg, in an essay on late-nineteenth-century culture, transposes Lukács's argument to the context of emerging metropolises. On his view, texts claiming to expose "a new inexplicableness in city crowds" and "a new unintelligibility in human relations" (103) foster an apparatus of control working to the advantage of dominant groups. Thus, Wells's recourse to the sublime for the depiction of present and future cities should be perceived as misguided and conservative.

When the Sleeper Wakes illustrates the ideological impasse evoked above because its recourse to the urban sublime leaves readers deprived of a clear political focus. Apart from the enigmatic prologue set in turn-of-the-twentieth England, Wells's dystopia relentlessly rushes from one overwhelming oceanic crowd to the other. Graham's discovery of twenty-second-century London unfolds in an emotional atmosphere set at maximum intensity. The novel can accordingly not differentiate among different modalities of the oceanic sublime: the awe-inspiring peaceful masses Graham discovers on the "moving ways" are barely distinguishable from the insurrectional mobs

struggling against the Council. One wonders even whether the repression of the London insurrection by colonial troops — an event planned by the masters of the Council yet averted by Graham's intervention — would have differed from other sublime spectacles depicted in actual scenes of the novel. One politically significant dialogical tension does, however, cut across this poorly contrasted picture: the chasm separating the gothic-looking laborers of the "[u]nder [s]ide" from the prosperous populations of the domed city. The latter's obliviousness to the social inequalities sustaining their welfare is underlined before Graham's visit to the lower depths. The Sleeper beholds a crowd of "lightly clad, bare-armed" dancers celebrating "The Festival of the Awakening" with "ecstatic faces" and "eyes half closed in pleasure" (152). One recognizes in these revelers the precursors of the Eloi: they are "painted fools" (154) whose "elaborate coquetry" (152) makes them ignorant of the gothic underworld a few hundred feet below their theater of pleasure. Yet these moments of social critique are overshadowed by the recurrence of sublime intensities. Symptomatically, the gesture allowing Graham most effectively to distance himself from the domed city is not social criticism but ecstatic contemplation. His release from this oppressive environment is indeed afforded by his mastery of flying machines. The novel, written shortly after Orville and Wilbur Wright's pioneering flight, contains breathtaking scenes of flying phrased in the idiom of the neo-classical sublime: the capacity to soar above the metropolis inspires elevation and grandeur. The flight scenes are barely functional from a narrative point of view, they express the novelist's delight at making readers share the "exhilaration" and "intoxication" of a thrilling new invention (Wells, *Sleeper* 120). Graham's flying becomes narratively significant only at the end of the novel when, as a seasoned "aeronaut" (123), he thwarts the airborne invasion of colonial troops. Overall, the flying scenes are emblematic of a discursive economy functioning as a calculus of emotional intensities. To the mesmerizing or horrifying spectacle of the metropolis, the novel opposes sublime elevation rather than critical enquiry.

The rhetoric of sublimity of the scientific romances is not the only discourse by which Wells represents the future. In *A Modern Utopia*, the novelist resorts to classic utopian anticipation. The latter genre is inimical to terror and wonder: it cultivates rational speculation. William Morris's *News from Nowhere* — a text Wells's *A Modern Utopia* emulates yet also criticizes —

flouts this utopian rationalism. Morris shies away from grandiosity. His time-traveling sleeper discovers a communist future devoid of colossal machines and big cities. All work is accomplished according to the principles of aestheticism and the arts and craft movement: objects are both useful and beautiful; they are produced by laborers acting by personal inclination. A rationalized variant of the picturesque, early-twenty-second-century Britain never subjects Morris's time traveler to the shock of the sublime. Rather than confronting him with titanic architecture and technology, it surprises him by the bathetic realization that Victorian industrial sublimity has withered away.

Wells's *A Modern Utopia* differs from Morris's perfect future by its content, not by its literary discourse. Instead of a realm of craftsmen, farmers, and artists, Wells imagines a paradise of tasteful engineers, scientists, and population managers. This future is less communistic than Morris's "splendid anarchy" (Wells, *Modern* 12): it blends twentieth-century social democracy with the nondemocratic elitism that remained Wells's hallmark to the end of his life. Instead of government by universal democratic representation, Wells's utopia is managed by the Samurai, a brotherhood of technophiles. The literary strategies Wells adopts in order to portray this world are complicated by the fact that he departs from the tradition of social anticipation aimed at evoking "Utopia[s] of dolls in the likeness of angels" (*Modern* 23). Wells's future knows no static perfection: it is a society in process, "an animated system of imperfections" (*Modern* 21). In order to evoke it, Wells mingles the travel narrative with the philosophical dialogue. His novelistic persona discovers the utopia step by step, and shares his impressions with a skeptical interlocutor mired in sentimentalism. This format does not make *A Modern Utopia* depart from rational, expository prose; however, the text comprises sociological essays tacked on to a *pro forma* narrative. The travel narrative's rational tenor is underscored early on: it begins in a Swiss landscape antithetical to the nature Romanticism of Shelley's sublime evocation of Mont Blanc. The first chapters are steeped in the practicalities of turn-of-the-twentieth-century upper-middle-class tourism. Within this utopian perimeter, the only spectacle leading Wells's prose to rise to grandeur is utopian London. The architecture of the future city is not cluttered with the "gawky muddle of ironwork" (*Modern* 163) plaguing late-Victorian architecture. Its structures are built by engineers trained as artists, who "exul[t]

in the liberties of steel" (164). The "great arches" and "domes of glass" of "stupendous libraries" and "mighty […] museums […] weave into […] subtly atmospheric forms" the rational inventiveness of their creators (164–65). The buildings are as such embodiments of the neo-classical sublime. Ironically, whereas in *When the Sleeper Wakes* the latter idiom offers release from the turbulence and horror of the gothic and oceanic sublime, in *A Modern Utopia* it constitutes the only channel of liberation from austere rationality.

Thus, Wells's sociological vision is paradoxical because it uses antagonistic voices for the portrayal of present and future worlds. One aspect of this paradox falls outside the scope of the present paper: I have mentioned above that the sublime, especially its gothic variant, may betoken a gesture of accommodation with the literary market. It is therefore symptomatic that Wells's supposedly more serious works of social anticipation — *A Modern Utopia*, typically — should eschew post-romantic intensities. While this Marxist-inspired reading does have some purchase on Wells's status as a popular writer, a more sympathetic approach of the scientific romances is required if we wish to maintain the hypothesis of a discursively pluralistic speculative naturalism. This less censorious perspective acknowledges that the romantic idiom of the sublime need not undercut social anticipation: the sublime acts as the voice of defamiliarization and dystopian clear-sightedness. A contrastive reading of Wells's romances and Morris's *News from Nowhere* illustrates this point. The difference between Morris's rational utopia and the sublime intensities of *The Time Machine* indeed betokens antithetical judgments about the evolution of society. The gothic Morlocks refute the prospect of Morris's angelic anarchistic communism. Similarly, Wells's portrayal of the Eloi reveals what Morris's social aestheticism amounts to in practice. For Wells, release from the obligation to work will not result in a harmonious communist collective but in the feminized futility of a leisure class living in the magnificence of a city in ruins. Class differences do not disappear: they are dichotomized to the point of biological difference.

Symptomatically, the tension between rational and romantic anticipation cuts across Wells's separate works themselves. I have so far indicated that, with the exception of its neoclassical portrayal of London, *A Modern Utopia* resists the sublime. One passage, however, invalidates this claim. As he depicts the education of the Samurai, Wells mentions that each year,

the members of this governing elite must "go right out of all the life of man into some wild and solitary place" (202) and be "alone with Nature" for seven days (203). During these "yearly pilgrimages" (203), the Samurai immerse themselves into the stereotypical environments of the Romantic natural sublime: they "commun[e] with the emptiness, the enigmatic spaces and silences, the winds and torrents and soulless forces that lie about the lit and ordered life of men" (206). Thus, Wells's rational utopia does justice to a nonhuman realm that threatens society. In *The Time Machine*, Wells had already offered a horrifying portrayal of non-human environments. The text's last passages depict the Earth millennia beyond the era of the Eloi and the Morlocks. The Time Traveller finds himself in a space of "abominable desolation" populated by "monster crab[s]" treading the shore of a "salt Dead sea" — a waste land of "poisonous green […] lichenous plants" (74). The rhetoric of sublimity therefore acknowledges this type of experience: it signals that non-human otherness manifests itself in human societies by the irruption of phenomena irreducible to rational planning. The sublime in sociological anticipation alerts readers to the ineradicable share of inhumanity in the social arrangements and urban design of the present and near future. At its most optimistic, the non-human takes the form of the neo-classical sublime, which implies grandeur beyond the compass of humankind. At its worst, it manifests itself as gothic horror, and evokes regression into irremediable dehumanization. If read along those lines, the rhetoric of urban sublimity does struggle against reification as effectively as the documentary components of the multivocal discourse of speculative naturalism. Its specific object consists in making perceptible the factors that impede the development of what Wells calls a "sane order" of human sociability capable of "increasing the beauty, the pleasure, the abundance and the promise of life" (*Modern* 88, 69).

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