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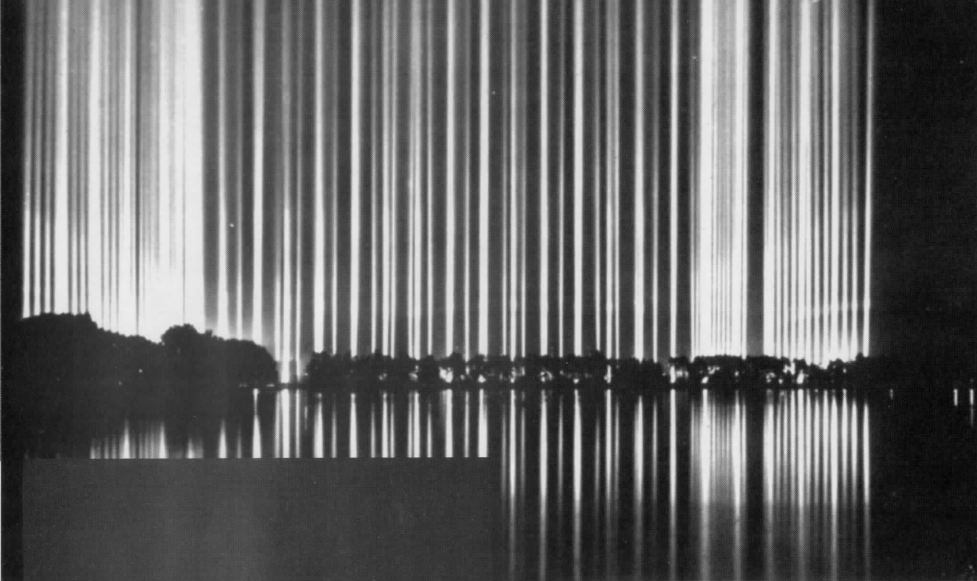
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Light of Return

by Amish Morrell

For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.¹

— Walter Benjamin



The photograph of Albert Speer's *Cathedral of Light* from the 1937 Nazi Party rally at Nuremberg carries an imprint of light, a trace of Speer's original sculpture across time, to where I encountered it in the pages of Susan Buck-Morss's *The Dialectics of Seeing*.² One evening a few weeks after seeing this, I was walking to an opening on the Lower East Side in Manhattan and saw what looked like Speer's sculpture in the New York skyline. Two vertical columns of light, each a fifty-foot square made up of forty-four searchlights — the same materials used by Speer — shone a mile into the night sky. This was a memorial to the victims of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, called *Tribute in Light*, installed where the towers once stood. The similarity was uncanny and disturbing, leaving me to wonder whether artists Julian LaVerdiere and Paul Myoda and architects John Bennett and Gustavo Bonevardi knew of Speer's sculpture over half a century earlier.³

Such a comparison may seem obscene. My intention is not to liken the events of September 11 to the systematic murder of European Jewry during the Holocaust, or the global empire-building ambitions of the United States to those of Germany under National Socialism. However, there seem to be provocative similarities. It is unlikely that supporters of National Socialism saw Speer's *Cathedral* as a symbol of Nazi genocide through which they recognized their complicity in a historical atrocity. We can speculate that people may have seen Speer's sculpture as one filled with utopian promise,

and that it could have served to mobilize collective consciousness around the possibilities of National Socialism. Similarly, New Yorkers may have seen *Tribute in Light* as a way of redeeming the lives of those who died in the twin towers. In the discourse around 9/11, remembrance has become practically inseparable from the war on terrorism. In death, the victims are re-animated, identified as part of a national identity and as objects of national mourning. The physical violence of their deaths was overtaken by a metaphysical violence that subsumed their lives within the political exigencies of the present. If there was ever a moment of silent reflection, it was quickly interrupted by the urgent demands of us foreign policy. But this is merely a tangent. I want to draw attention to the fact that both of these sculptures serve to structure collective consciousness around a set of historical events, and consider how the juxtaposition of these two images serves to shift how one reads the present.

Light is the most minimal of materials. Connoting both purity and divinity, light is a captivating and attractive force. Perhaps this is why it has come to symbolize the eternal, the idea that some things always remain. Events continue to have effect through their consequences, giving the past infinite, eventual possibilities for return. Although historical materialism ensures that the past has access to the present, the future is always unknown. In the face of this indeterminacy, the photographic fixing of light has a consolatory power by providing the trace that is contained in the photograph with access to the future. It is a technical transformation of light in which the visible image is burned onto film and becomes the template for its reproduction. In the dark-room it is miniaturized, contained and infinitely reproducible into contexts that are not known when the image is taken. Through this relation, the photograph provides a trace of the past access to the world of the present and to unknown future possibilities. However, the photograph of the sculpture and the sculpture itself each has a different structure of apprehension, and this profoundly shapes how each of them can be read.

Top: The Party Rally at Nuremberg. Anti-aircraft searchlights project a 'Dome of Lights' into the sky.

Bottom: *Tribute in Light*. Photo: Ray Stubblebine. Courtesy: Reuters.

Returning to the sculptural forms, there is, despite their different contexts, a structural similarity in both images, that reveals an associative power contained within the sculptures. They both allow for the unification of subjectivities in space and time. *Tribute* was installed from March 11 until April 11, 2002, from dusk until 11pm each night and could be seen, in ideal viewing conditions, for a mile above Manhattan and in a twenty-five mile radius. All of New York could see *Tribute*, all at the same time. At a time when the world was becoming increasingly divided, this work helped unify people and redeem a sense of innocence. *Tribute* beckoned the viewing subject into an ideal of nationalism, which foregrounded normative concepts of race and gender (among other identities) organized around principles of inclusion and exclusion that are upheld by the state and within civil society. (Think of how rigid border controls and immigration policies in the United States have become since 9/11.) The light of *Tribute* was pure and all-illuminating, apparently without contradiction or complexity. In its brightness, it blinded the viewer to difference and contingency, and instead served to reaffirm exclusive ideals of national and civic citizenship.

Rather than unifying a public within a specific place, photography allows for the formation of publics across space and time. Through its photographic trace, Speer's luminous *Cathedral* survives to be read in another context, as the image of *Tribute* also survives to be read within these very pages. But this does not mean that we are able to readily grasp the significance of either of these images. Like so many other images, we may view them without thinking about what they mean. Perhaps we are bored or distracted, feeling guilty about something we said, or wondering whether we turned off the stove. They each come to us as yet another image from a sea of images, traces of light refracted across time. We need barely look to know what they mean, to enter into the collective consciousness shaped by those events as they are inscribed in the images. To prevent the return of the same, it is necessary to introduce difference into our reading of the image. For it is often the bad dream that startles us

into wakefulness: the images of the airplanes hitting the towers, or the unfamiliar photograph in which the everyday suddenly turns macabre and unreal. For me, it is the image of *Tribute in Light* that becomes dream-like in its sudden unfamiliarity and shatters my sense of the present.

Placing these images together takes them out of the web of collective association that structures their respective taken-for-granted meanings. In seeing the installation in New York in relation to the image of Speer's sculpture, my sense of this monument as it was historically intended is ruptured. The image opens a relationship between Nuremberg and the present, between *Cathedral of Light* and *Tribute in Light* in which my point of aesthetic reference has shifted to a different register of meaning, to a different time and a different context. The result of this juxtaposition is a new association in which the image is extracted from the enclosure of the past and given entry to the present. This relation constitutes an awakening, but only an awakening into yet another dream, just as the events of 9/11 bring about a new vision of America's place in the world of the twenty-first century.

In Walter Benjamin's oft-quoted phrase from *Thesis on the Philosophy of History*, cited above, the disappearance to which he refers is not the image of the past, but the present, as it becomes past. The past itself never returns; that is what it means to be of the past. Yet through the image, light gives a sensation of the past's return. The past anticipates our arrival through the image, yet remains forever at a distance, like all images of the past. To place these two images together is to locate them in a new constellation of thought, to stage a conversation with an irretrievable past. It is to disrupt the enclosed dream of the present.

Notes

1. "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968)
2. Susan Buck-Morss. *The Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1999)
3. <http://architecture.about.com/library/weekly/aawtc-memorial.htm> (16 September 2002)

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