

Attributed to Petrus Christus.  
*Annunciation*, ca. 1450.  
Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
New York.



# Doors: On the Materiality of the Symbolic

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## 1. Cultural Techniques

We have forgotten how “to close a door quietly and discreetly, yet firmly.” In his American exile Theodor W. Adorno diagnosed the decline of an elementary cultural technique [*Kulturtechnik*], something he felt to be nothing less than a prelude to fascism. One has to slam car doors and refrigerator doors, Adorno noted, while other doors snap shut on their own. Doors cease to be cultural media that preserve a “core of experience” and instead change into machines that demand movements in which Adorno, in all seriousness, saw “already the violent, hard-hitting, unresting jerkiness of Fascist abuses” at work.<sup>1</sup>

One can make of this what one will, but Adorno, in understanding the disappearance of the door-handle as of epochal import, must doubtless count as a philosopher of culture who had already confronted the fundamental significance of cultural techniques in the 1940s. Adorno places gesture and mechanism, human and inhuman actors into a relation in which both sides gain “agency”<sup>2</sup> and in which even the inhuman actor has the power to decenter and disempower the subject in its being. In Adorno’s sense, however, closing a door is a cultural technique that implies a concept of culture as singular. The metamorphosis of a door into a machine and the unlearning of the cultural technique of closing a door is thus a symptom of the decline of culture generally—in the sense of high culture—not of the transition to another culture. For Adorno, culture is something that belongs only to people who deal with things anthropomorphically; that is, to bourgeois people. Cultural techniques would be gestures that anthropomorphize things and include them in the humanoid sphere so long as the things permit.

The concept of cultural techniques [*Kulturtechniken*] that has come into use since the late 1990s is based on a different concept of culture. This concept implies a plurality of cultures and abandons a one-sided conception of human-thing relations that privileges human beings. Culture in this view is other than Adorno would have had it: a humanoid-technoid hybrid that has always—not just since the invention of the automatic door—been thus. The concept of cultural technique always comprises a more or less complex actor network that includes

technical objects and chains of operations (including gestures, among other things) in equal measure. Humanness and the power of agency typically ascribed to human beings are in this regard not taken as always already given but as constituted in the first place through cultural techniques. In this sense cultural techniques allow both the being human or the being inhuman of the actors, and they reveal inversely the extent to which the human actor has always already been decentered onto the technical object. That is, cultural techniques point to a world of the symbolic, which is the world of machines.<sup>3</sup> The door is—or was—such a machine.

## 2. Inside/Outside

Every culture starts with the introduction of distinctions. This presupposes, from a systems-theoretical perspective, not only an observer who observes this distinction but techniques that process this distinction and thereby first make observable the unity of the things distinguished. Thus the difference between human beings and animals is one that could not be thought without the mediation of a cultural technique. In this not only tools and weapons—which paleo-anthropologists like to interpret as the exteriorization of human organs and gestures—play an essential role; so, too, does the invention of the door, whose first form was presumably the gate [*Gatter*] and which is difficult to interpret as the exteriorization of any part of the human body. The door appears much more as a medium of a coevolutionary domestication of animals *and* human beings. The construction of a fold with a gate, something that turns the hunter into a shepherd, leads not only to the domestication of animal species but above all to the interruption of those human-animal metamorphoses to which Paleolithic cave paintings attest.<sup>4</sup> In the nineteenth century Gottfried Semper recognized the fold as “the original vertical enclosure [*Abschluss*] that humans invented.”<sup>5</sup>

Doors and thresholds are not only formal attributes of Western architecture in the sense of a canon of buildings. Doors are architectural media as an elementary cultural technique because they process the guiding difference of architecture, the difference between inside and outside.<sup>6</sup> They simultaneously thematize this distinction and thereby establish a system that is made of the operations of opening and closing. Doors thus pertain to architecture as a whole and as a cultural system; that is, as something that surpasses the individual building.

What Martin Heidegger, drawing on Georg Simmel, suggests about the bridge also counts for the door: “the bridge does not just connect banks that are already there. The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream. The bridge designedly causes them to lie across from each other.”<sup>7</sup> In the same way, the gate does not simply connect inside and outside nor the door one space and

another; rather, the door puts inside and outside into a special relation in which the outside first becomes properly outside and the inside first becomes properly inside. In contrast to the closedness of the undifferentiated wall, Simmel writes, the closed door is both closed and also the sign of this closure.<sup>8</sup> The door brings to the fore the unity of the difference of inside and outside in that “it presents the possibility of closing against the possibility of opening and keeps both possibilities present.”<sup>9</sup>

Doors are operators of symbolic, epistemic, and social processes that, with help from the difference between inside and outside, generate spheres of law, secrecy, and privacy and thereby articulate space in such a way that it becomes a carrier of cultural codes.

### 3. *Fores*

City space, door, and law have been bound up with one another from the beginning of the history of civilization.<sup>10</sup> When in Roman antiquity a city was to be established, the founder (e.g., Romulus) cut a furrow with a plow that demarcated an enclosure. This enclosure was inviolable: neither foreigner nor citizen had the right to cut across it. So that one could enter and leave the city at all, the plowshare at certain places had to be lifted up and carried so as not to leave a furrow. These intermediary spaces marked the gates (*portae*) of the city.<sup>11</sup> The city gate or portal took its name from the plow that was carried (*portare*). The gate threshold arises from the interruption of the line distinguishing inside and outside: the gate is the exception of a distinction. The gate gives access to the space beyond the threshold; it frames the unbordered field that becomes the *ager Romanus*, the city space of Rome: “With the city law comes into being. City and law are co-extensive.”<sup>12</sup> The law, like the city, is disclosed through doors and gates.

With regard to the enclosure and the gate [*Gatter*], the primordial function of the door—in the sense of the Latin *fores* or Greek *thyra*—may be called “nomological.” The Greek word *nomos*, which is usually translated as *law*, originally meant (according to Carl Schmitt) the measurement and division of pasturelands. *Nomos* is accordingly tied to a concrete space; it is that which sets off a space from an outside in order to establish a political, social, and religious order with the assistance of the difference thus posited. To this extent, Schmitt says, “the *nomos* can be defined as a wall.”<sup>13</sup> But as Kafka’s parable “Before the Law” makes clear, the *nomos* is first constituted as an opening through which one can reach the law. A door is accordingly an opening in the *nomos*, a place in which the difference that constitutes the law must be negated in order to be disclosed.

The “man from the country” in Kafka’s parable waits before an open door, the first of a multitude of further doors, a door that is closed by a symbolic order

established by a doorkeeper. In Kafka the two states of opening and closing, which normally can happen only one after the other, seem to cross over into each other. Is the door closed while it is open? The waiting of the man by the door generates the paradox that the state of opening has the effect of an interruption.<sup>14</sup> The logic of a door that is closed while it is opened “as always” is the logic of the symbolic.<sup>15</sup> The door and the doorkeeper implement the differential law of the signifier itself.

To step through a door means to subject oneself to the law of a symbolic order, a law that is established by means of the distinction of inside and outside, whether the law of the *polis* or the paternal law of the household. A door, Jacques Lacan says, is not something fully real. To the contrary: “In its nature, the door belongs to the symbolic order. . . . The door is a real symbol, the symbol *par excellence*, the symbol in which man’s passing, through the cross it sketches, intersecting access and closure, can always be recognized.”<sup>16</sup>

Since early on, the culture-technical processing of the distinction between inside and outside has been tied to the distinction between profane and sacred zones—perhaps the first of all articulations of space. Other distinctions can be added to this distinction—that between the political (the space of the polis) and the extrapolitical (the wilderness outside the city gates), the space of law and that of lawlessness, or safe and dangerous places.

“Fores . . . in liminibus profanarum aedium ianuae nominantur,” Cicero says: “Doors are called the access points (*ianuae*) at the thresholds of profane buildings.”<sup>17</sup> The door is tightly connected to the concept of threshold, a zone that belongs neither to the inside nor the outside and is thus an extremely dangerous place. The house door was imagined in ancient Rome as dividing two worlds: “the world outside, where are innumerable hostile influences and powers, and the region within the limits of the house, the influences and powers of which are friendly.”<sup>18</sup> Arnold van Gennep interprets crossing through doors and gates as a direct rite of passage: “To cross the threshold is to unite oneself with a new world. It is thus an important act in marriage, adoption, ordination, and funeral ceremonies.”<sup>19</sup> Many sarcophagi and funeral altars depict house doors or city gates. Just as every bridge points to that last bridge that leads into the beyond, so every threshold points to that last threshold at the entrance to Hades, which mortals at the end of their earthly sojourn must cross over, whether to the gates of hell or to the pearly gates.

In a depiction of the annunciation that was ascribed by Otto Pächt to Hubert van Eyck (and is nowadays ascribed to Petrus Christus), Mary stands on the threshold of a portal over an inscription that calls her Regina Coeli (queen of heaven). The scene is of an investiture. The office of queen of heaven is con-

ferred on Mary through a threshold that treats the transition from the inside of the building to the outside as the entrance of the body mortal into the royal second body and overwrites her given name with the queenly title. The threshold speaks—it points to another door threshold to be crossed, that between the earthly and the heavenly. The threshold makes the title into a performative speech act whose legal validity is certified by the angel as the emissary of the Big Other.

That the door threshold—like the no-man’s-land or the Roman *pomerium*—originally had a sacred character is not surprising.<sup>20</sup> Countless precautionary measures surround it: the horseshoe, the image of Saint Sebastian, the soul of an animal that was sacrificed on the threshold, a special roof, consecrated vessels, the mezuzah, the doormat, the corpses of slain enemies buried under the threshold.<sup>21</sup> The threshold is haunted. The ethnologist Marcel Griaule even describes the door in an article for Georges Bataille’s *Dictionnaire critique* as a “fearful instrument which one should only handle with a pure conscience and according to rituals and which must be surrounded with all the magical guarantees.”<sup>22</sup>

Ethnology also confirms the “nomological” function of the door. According to Arnold van Gennep, the door in “savage” and “half-civilized” communities principally symbolizes the “taboo against entering.”<sup>23</sup> The door thus originally had the structure of the law in simultaneously forbidding and inviting its own transgression—under the condition that whoever commits the act of transgression undergoes a change of status. The ominous door in the Bluebeard story functions according to this logic of prohibition, a logic that sets desire in motion in the first place.<sup>24</sup> If one then subsequently knocks on the door, one knocks at the connection of human beings to the law—that is, to the signifier. And when the connection of the human being to the signifier is modified, as Lacan says, so, too, are “the moorings that anchor his being.”<sup>25</sup>

If the door is a machine by which the human being is subjected to the law of the signifier, then the lock is the part of the door that expresses the law as interdiction. There is no door without a lock, even if the lock is realized as a purely linguistic prohibition. Seventeenth-century Dutch paintings show doors without a latch but none without a lock. In Bluebeard’s case (or cases), key and prohibition are chiasmatically constructed. Inasmuch as Bluebeard at once forbids his wife to open the chamber *and* puts in her hand the key that makes precisely this possible, he places her in the situation of desiring, which always includes a transgression of the law.<sup>26</sup> Desire is a device that can be assembled from things and words.

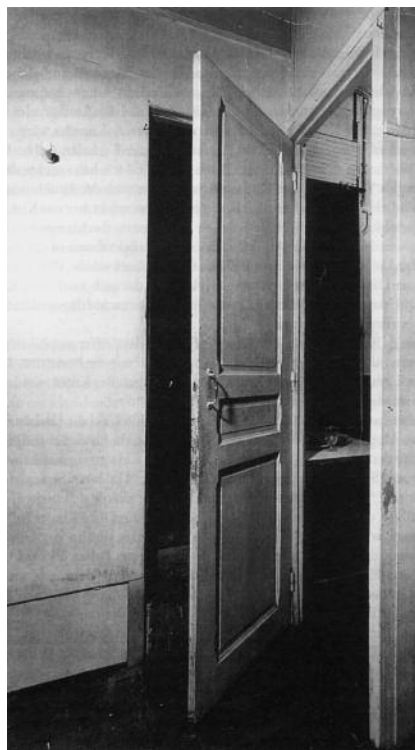
#### 4. Duchamp’s Door

The layout [*Gliederung*] of household space by no means relates neutrally to everyday life; it not only exercises power over our lives but articulates life in the

sense of historically contingent codes.<sup>27</sup> Walls, doors, windows, and stairs initially subdivide living space in order to tie it point by point together again. Certain culture-technical media demarcate space so that it can become the carrier of cultural codes. But this does not mean that the demarcation of space by doors, thresholds, windows, stairs, or corridors is based in every case on codes. Houses and their arrangement of space emerge more quickly than codes can be established. On the other hand, houses long outlive the social codes that govern their organization of space and thus come into conflict with newer codes. Thus space and codes shift against each other in a permanently historical way. The code needs previous demarcations of space, but if codes are first to be culturally stabilized at all, they can again overwrite demarcations of space or enter into a relationship of tension with them. An example of this is the walk-through room or vestibule [*Durchgangszimmer*]. Until about 1650, intimate and publicly used spaces were not clearly separated. Architects still held to Alberti's rule that each room should have as many doors as possible opening into all other adjacent rooms. Complaints about the vestibule arose in the nineteenth century, a telling indication that a code based on the distinction of private and public had come into conflict with extant demarcations of space.

In 1927, unusual circumstances in the layout of his small apartment at no. 11 of the rue Larrey in Paris led Marcel Duchamp to a discovery in door technology that would resolve a conflict between the organization of space and social codes. Two doors that bumped into each other divided the bedroom from the bathroom and the bedroom from the studio with the effect that whoever went from the bathroom into the bedroom or vice versa risked being seen from the studio. A possibly divine dazzle breaks forth from the door that realizes the law. At least the man from the country in Kafka's parable thinks so. The door in the sense of the Latin *porta* (Greek *pylē*), however, enables seeing. One day in May 1927, as told by Lydie Sarazin in her memoir, she (who was not yet engaged to Duchamp at this point) walked naked out of the bathroom and was seen by Duchamp's brother-in-law Jean Crotti across the way. Duchamp replaced the two doors with a single door, a "*porte paradoxale*."

"By making sure that the two doorframes were of exactly the same dimensions, as you opened the door to the bedroom you closed the door to the bathroom. No space lost. No light lost. And that is how he hit upon the idea of the double-use door."<sup>28</sup> A French proverb says a door must be either open or shut.<sup>29</sup> Even Lacan, who could not overlook the fundamental anthropological and media-theoretical



Marcel Duchamp.  
Door: 11 Rue Larrey, 1927.

significance of the door, emphasizes the proverbially binary logic of the door.<sup>30</sup> “I showed these matters to my friends,” Duchamp says in a later interview, “and said that the proverb ‘il faut qu’une porte soit ouverte ou fermée’ is hereby caught red-handed and charged with imprecision.”<sup>31</sup>

In 1933, Jean van Heeckeren and Jacques-Henry Lévesque commented on “la porte de Duchamp” for the first time in the Parisian review *Orbes*. “When you open this door,” they write,

to go into the bedroom, it closes the entrance to the bathroom, and when you open this door to go into the bathroom, it closes the door to the studio. . . . “Il faut qu’une porte soit ouverte ou fermée” seems an irreducible truth. Nonetheless Marcel Duchamp has found a way to construct a door that is open and closed at the same time.<sup>32</sup>

With respect to the proverbially binary circuit-logic of the door, Duchamp’s door, which can be simultaneously open and closed, is justly paradoxical. If the one space is opened, the other is automatically closed. Duchamp’s paradoxical door is thus always simultaneously open and closed. The door quickly acquired the reputation of being a “Dadaist provocation,” but the door was not in the least dysfunctional.<sup>33</sup> To the contrary. The door in the rue Larrey processed and stabilized differences: between public and private, between naked and dressed, between woman and man; it regulated the traffic between the passage of a look and the passage of a naked body so that both passages mutually and automatically ruled each other out. The passage of the body from the bathroom to the bedroom ruled out the passage of the look from the studio to the bedroom, and vice versa. The anecdote told by Lydie Sarazin reveals that the door as a cultural technique fulfills at least two tasks. As a digital medium the door is concerned with the passage of bodies. As an analog medium, the door is concerned with the passage of looks or with making an interior space visible.

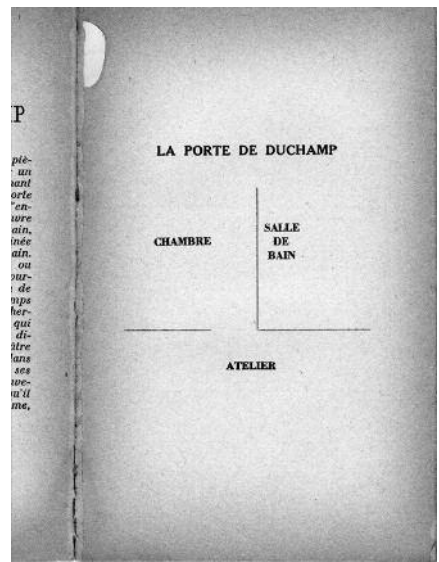
In an interview with Michel Sanouillet, Duchamp states that the point was the maximal use of cramped space in his rue Larrey apartment.<sup>34</sup> And, yet, two sketches, possibly originating from Duchamp himself, follow the short text in the review *Orbes* and invite the conjecture that Duchamp possibly tied larger reflections of an artistic-mediatic sort to the door.

The sketches, which are found on the front and back sides of a sheet of paper, show an abstract floor plan of Duchamp’s apartment that, because of its abstraction, is reminiscent of a circuit design. Because the sketches indicate the walls by two lines that separate the three rooms (*atelier*, *chambre*, and *salle de bain*) and because the opening of the door is indicated only by a break of the line whereas the closing is shown by a unbroken line, the viewer can manage to see



the door only if he or she turns the page of the periodical around. The door cannot be seen if one looks at only one of the two pages. The viewer is thus forced to carry out a hinge operation with the periodical page analogous to the hinge operation one carries out with a door, so that one can see what the heading of both pages claims to show: “La porte de Duchamp.” What constitutes the door in the first place is this shuttling. The operation presupposes the thing; it helps to bring the thing into being in the first place. Duchamp’s door is first made visible in the observation of the unity of the difference of frontside and backside. In this it points to the culture-technical definition of the door as the unity of the difference between inside and outside.

The viewer who wants to bring the *porte de Duchamp* into view by flipping the page back and forth, however, runs into a surprising difficulty. The backside of the page, which shows the door opened between *chambre* and *salle de bain*, stands on its head. To recognize the door, the usual turning of the page along the vertical axis from right to left does not work. One must instead turn the entire magazine an additional 180 degrees. (If you tear the page out, a shuttle operation along the horizontal axis of the page will do.) If one assumes that this was Duchamp’s intention and that no error was introduced during the printing, one might speculate that Duchamp wanted to subtly point out to the reader that the production of a periodical or a book is based on a manifold flipping or folding operation that makes sure the many pages printed on one sheet end up in the correct order in the periodical. Just as the *porte de Duchamp* first appears in the observation of the unity of the difference of the front and back sides, so also the front and back sides, or two adjacent pages in the same alignment, appear only because of a folding operation. Only by multiple vertical and horizontal folding do pages, which stand upside down on the printer’s sheet, appear right side up. The happenstance of an apparent mistake of the printer’s sheet in the journal *Orbes* reveals that linearity is the result of nonlinearity. Linearity is the result of a multiple folding operation that transforms a nonlinear layout into a linear one. Analogously, the first flip operation one does with the page reveals the *porte de Duchamp*, inasmuch as it is the repeated “fort-da” game that one is required to play with the front and backside of the page that makes the lines on the sketches oscillate between their broken and continuous states. “The human being,” Lacan writes, “dedicates his time literally to the unfolding of this structural alternation in which presence and absence mutually invoke each other.”<sup>35</sup> While the reader of *Orbes* devotes his or her time to this alternation of front and backside, which makes the *porte de Duchamp* appear like a thaumatropic afterimage effect (that nonetheless is hindered



Jean van Heeckeren and  
Jacques-Henry Lévesque.  
“La porte de Duchamp,” 1933.

by the upside-down orientation of the backside), he or she is reminded of the fact that the symbolic is tied to door-shaped objects in the real, whether doors proper or similar flip-objects (as, for instance, book pages or trigger relays).

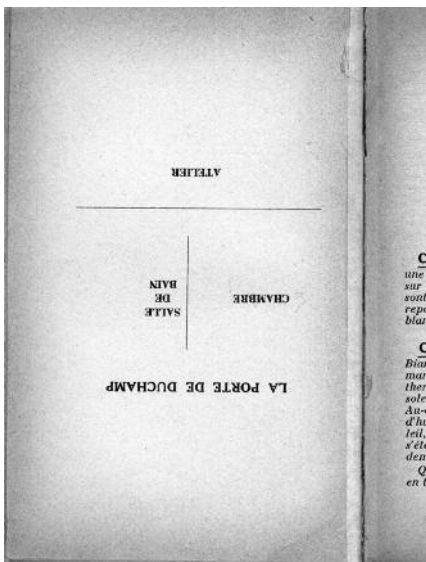
## 5. After the Door

“Doors,” Robert Musil writes, “are a thing of the past.” Musil points to the chiasmus as the special structure of the door. This structure implies that a closed door, inasmuch as it represents a hindrance to a glance or a body that wants to go through the wall, begets a flood of dramatic information:

Doors are a thing of the past, even if back doors are said to crop up at architectural competitions. A door consists of a rectangular wooden frame set in the wall, on which a moveable board is fastened. This board at least is still barely comprehensible. For it is supposed to be light enough to be easily pivoted, and it fits within the walnut and oak paneling that up until recently adorned every proper living room. Yet even this board has already lost most of its significance. Up until the middle of the last century you could listen in with your ear pressed against it, and what secrets you could sometimes hear! The count had just disowned his stepdaughter and the hero, who was supposed to marry her, heard just in time that they planned to poison him. Let anyone try such a feat in a contemporary house! Before he even got to listen in at the door, he’d have long since heard everything through the walls.<sup>36</sup>

According to Musil, the door was the site of a drama but is no longer. Musil’s essay contains a small history of architecture and the city. As long as doors play their role as operators of difference between inside and outside, they also create, with the help of the public-private distinction, an asymmetry in knowledge. Doors produce an information gap. They therefore play an indispensable role in the production of thermodynamic or information-theoretical knowledge. Not by chance is Maxwell’s demon a gatekeeper.<sup>37</sup> As long as doors fulfill their informative function, they sustain a disequilibrium in energy or knowledge that makes an increase of entropy in the entire system all but inevitable. In this way doors serve the circulation of knowledge and thereby become actors in the drama. Human beings mingle with nonhuman beings. If walls, as Musil imagines, have

become membranes in modern living-machines, then the door loses the function Simmel describes for it: to signify the closedness of the wall on the basis of its virtual opening. The information differential is balanced out. Maxwell’s demon is wrecked, and entropy reigns.



In a situation of complete entropy, nothing more can happen, something that yet could be asserted of the classic form of narrative. Musil diagnoses the disappearance of the door in the context of the disappearance of the traditional role that the house had to play:

Back then your house served the purpose of maintaining appearances for which there is always money at hand; today, however, there are other objects that satisfy the same purpose: travel, cars, sports, winter vacations, suites in luxury hotels. . . . And how then should there be doors if there is no “house”?!<sup>38</sup>

What does Musil mean when he says “there is no ‘house,’” or what does Adorno mean when he says in 1944 that “the house is past,” if not that the house has ceased being an “existential arrangement,” a *condition humaine*?<sup>39</sup> The existence of the modern Western person will no longer be styled by the house; that is, to speak with Heidegger, by dwelling. Building no longer belongs in dwelling but in the passage. Existence is designed from the point of view of transit. Dwelling means nothing more than having a shelter. To speak with Deleuze, in cultural-historical terms we live in the age of the English: “In the trinity of founding-building-dwelling the French build and the Germans lay foundations, but the English dwell. For them a tent is all that is needed.”<sup>40</sup> That, however, is a concept of dwelling that dissociates dwelling from the house and therefore strikes culturally pessimistic philosophers as the end of the transcendental possibility of being able to dwell at all: “Dwelling, in the proper sense, is now impossible.”<sup>41</sup> A person’s social status is therefore no longer to be read from how he or she lives but from where he or she gets off and what he or she drives. The cosmopolitan, Paul Virilio writes, becomes a utopian citizen who lives only in means of transport and states of transit.<sup>42</sup> Adorno had already diagnosed the disappearance of dwelling in 1944 in U.S.-American trailer parks: “The hardest hit, as everywhere, are those who have no choice. They live, if not in slums, in bungalows that tomorrow may be leaf-huts, trailers, cars, camps, or the open air. The house is past.”<sup>43</sup> The container is the architectonic signature of the present.

In the architectures of transit, of the “no-places”—as Mark Augé calls zones such as airports, train stations, highway restaurants, and so on—that the modern nomad “inhabits,” as well as in the virtual architecture of cyberspace (i.e., the Internet), the difference between inside and outside is deconstructed and permanently put out of play.<sup>44</sup> One can learn this especially well from Las Vegas. Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown’s investigations for their classic *Learning from Las Vegas* clearly show that the architectonic principle of the casino rests upon dissolving the connection of inside and outside. The outside, the façade, no longer

points to an interior but is completely dissociated from the building and can stand on the street dozens of meters away from the building. Conversely, the inside gambling space seems to have no outside. The interior spaces are windowless, electrically lit twenty-four hours a day. In them, day and night cease to exist. Artificial light is not used to define the space. On the contrary, it obscures the borders of the room, while walls and windows do not serve as reflective surfaces for the light but are arranged to be dark and light-absorbing. Light sources, chandeliers, jukeboxes, and slot machines are all completely separated from walls and coverings: “The intricate maze under the low ceiling never connects with outside light or outside space.”<sup>45</sup>

## 6. Glass Doors

How important or how disturbing is the making visible of the distinction between inside and outside in urban architecture? A film that is almost entirely devoted to transparency in architecture is Jacques Tati’s *Playtime* (1967). *Playtime* observes how architecture observes.<sup>46</sup> But these two levels of observation are not arranged hierarchically. Rather the observation of architecture and the observation of the film penetrate each other.

Tati’s glass doors are so transparent that they—at least as visible signs of a possible opening or closing—become dispensable. Only the symbolic gesture of the real process of opening a door remains, as when, after Monsieur Hulot has inadvertently destroyed the glass door in a restaurant, the doorman performs the gesture of opening the door with nothing but the doorknob in his hand. Whether the door is there or not seems not to matter anymore. All that counts is the pure gesture of hospitality, the invitation to come in. In other instances in the movie, glass doors are so barely transparent that they operate as mirrors. An object perceived in a mirror is usually present to hand only as a virtual object. This occurs, for instance, in the brief moments in which, as if by coincidence, the Parisian postcard themes of the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, and Sacré Coeur are reflected onto balcony windows and glass doors, even though they are completely invisible in the “real” surroundings of the completely glassed-in office building. In other scenes, Tati combines a look through a pane of glass with the reflection of light on the surface of the glass. A semitransparent pane of glass can both mirror something and project the mirrored object onto a spot in the real space behind the glass. A person, for instance, who is inside a building that is completely glassed-in can be seen in this way from the other side of the street. Something can become visible at a spot where it is not located. Thus the scene in which Hulot tries in vain to meet an official whom he sees projected in full frame on a glass wall in the house across the street. Hulot storms out to enter the house, and the real official shows up behind him.

## 7. Revolving and Sliding Doors

“The only original door conceived in our time,” Musil writes, “is the glass revolving door of the hotel and department store.”<sup>47</sup> The revolving door was invented in 1888 by the American Theophilus Van Kannel, who called it the “new revolving storm door” in his patent application.<sup>48</sup> With the revolving door, which consists of three or four panes of glass inside a circular wind-trap cylinder, the door becomes a space of which it is possible to say that one is “in the door.”

In the past, Musil writes in the conclusion of his essay, entry doors had representational duties. Into the place of the symbolic order visibly manifest on the threshold to which one subjects oneself by crossing, the door steps forward as a technology for the management of flows of people. Instead of producing traffic pile-ups or drafts of wind like the traditional swinging door (depending on whether it opens inward or outward), the revolving door subjects flows of people to a uniform allotment and speed and separates at the same time those who enter from the outside environment. “In the old way,” Van Kannel crowed about his invention, “every person passing through first brings a chilling gust of wind with its snow, rain, or dust, including the noise of the street; then comes the unwelcome bang.”<sup>49</sup> The revolving door manifests a conception of architecture as a thermodynamic machine and a shift from the nomological function of the door to a control function. The revolving door is also a paradox: one passes through a door that is permanently closed. “Always Closed” was Van Kannel’s first advertising slogan. A visible sign of this separation of door and people is the disappearance of the door latch. The conspicuous characteristic of the sliding door and the revolving door (especially if it works automatically) lies precisely in the fact that neither door has a latch. Perhaps one could define the epoch of bourgeois architecture as the epoch of the door latch. By means of the door latch the door becomes a tool to be serviced by the hand of the user. The latch makes the door anthropomorphic. The latch is to the door what the handle is to the vase: an anthropomorphizing interface between user and object. “The grip,” Semper writes about the handle, “must be comfortable. It must invite or even entice the hand’s grasp. The human hand is the decisive condition.”<sup>50</sup> However, as one can see in the interior paintings of Samuel van Hoogstraten, the doors of seventeenth-century Dutch residences had locks but no latches.<sup>51</sup> The upholstered soul [*Etuimensch*] of the nineteenth century was the first to want to shake hands with the door as with a fellow human being. But lost again in the twentieth century was the idea that a door is an anthropomorphic tool that possesses an interface with the human body in the latch that is shaped to fit the hand. “What does it mean for the subject,” Adorno asks, “that there are no more . . . gentle latches but turnable knobs?”<sup>52</sup> Already with the

automatic door-closer, in which Bruno Latour notes the mixing of human and inhuman agents, architecture's ascription to human agents of the unique power to act is partly lost.<sup>53</sup> No wonder Adorno found doors that had "the tendency to snap shut by themselves" dreadful. In the automatic door-closer, which makes door closing by means of a handle obsolete, he diagnoses precisely the subversion of the patriarchal law of the threshold, because automatic doors encourage among those who enter "the bad manners of not looking behind them, not shielding the interior of the house which receives them."<sup>54</sup> The automatic door-closer makes the act of hesitating behind the threshold and attentiveness for the door superfluous and thereby undermines symbolic gestures of respect for the host on whose domain one has set foot—symbolic gestures that had been programmed into the apparatus of the door. The automatic door starts another program that levels symbolic differences and makes setting foot in a space into an act of occupation. Revolving doors and automated sliding doors are no longer tools. With them the door becomes a machine.

In his *Maison Loucheur* in 1929, Le Corbusier installed sliding doors that transformed the living room into several bedrooms at night. The sliding door was "the lever that set the *machine à habiter* in motion"; it definitively transformed the house into a has-been.<sup>55</sup> Not by chance, the sliding door, which had been used in Western architecture up to the nineteenth century only in warehouses, found its initial use in cabins on steamships and train compartments. Sliding doors are the signature of an epoch in which building is governed by transit rather than dwelling. One of the first documented attempts to fully automate a sliding door comes from the year 1896. From around 1914 onward sliding doors were fitted with a hydraulic system or motor, but even these sliding doors needed to be operated by a person who was responsible for the dangerous opening and closing of the door by push button.

Tati's *Playtime* allows one to study what it means for the subject when the door is dissociated from the door-opening instrument because of electrification. In one scene Monsieur Hulot wants to leave an ultramodern apartment building but finds himself trapped in a glass compartment between the building door and the apartment door because he cannot find the door opener, which is probably mounted on a ledge on the side wall. By the 1930s the complete automation of the door had been achieved with the application of door-opening sensors such as the light-sensitive *electric eye* or the pressure-sensitive *magic carpet*.<sup>56</sup> In this way "the responsibility for the opening and closing of a door" was completely "reassigned from the human to the machine."<sup>57</sup> Opening and closing operations thus took leave of human beings. Only out of grace or condescension do sliding doors now open before the approaching human "actors," whom the

doors have degraded into mere agents of their opening by means of sensors. Such doors no longer take orders from those who would pass through them but from an invisible power that rules over their opening and closing.

## 8. Deformation

The deformation of the architectonic form to which once was assigned the difference of inside and outside, its steady dissolution into a “medium” (in the systems-theoretical sense of the word), means more than a farewell to the human being. With the arrival of “fluid space” in Mies van der Rohe’s Barcelona Pavilion of 1929, where the floor surface of the outer space continues threshold-free into the inner space, and with the disappearance of thresholds and door latches, the symbolic and the presence of the law in the world are also in retreat. With the retreat of the symbolic from the door, the door becomes a biopolitical machine that addresses the human being no longer as a *persona* but treats, forms, and monitors him or her as “bare life.” A revolving door heralds nobody, whether she is named Mary or something else, whether she is Regina Coeli or not. This means that reality is becoming ever more psychotic.

The distinction of inside and outside is a distinction, as psychoanalysis from Sigmund Freud to Lacan teaches, at the very base of the constitution of reality. The existential judgment that tests reality, generating assessments such as “this object is real, this object exists,” functions in relation to a complementary negative judgment: “This is not my dream or my hallucination.”<sup>58</sup> If the symbolic order (the law) is rejected, as is the case in psychosis, so-called reality takes on hallucinatory features. The imaginary, which is usually assigned to the “inside” of the subject, becomes projected onto the outside, showing up in or blending with the real.

“Your reality is already half video hallucination,” says the father—who exists only as a video image—in David Cronenberg’s *Videodrome* (1983), a film that includes a short scene that not entirely coincidentally shows freely floating doors being carried diagonally across the street by workers. Hollywood films such as *The Matrix* (1999, dir. Larry Wachowski and Andrew Wachowski) or *Dark City* (1998, dir. Alex Proyas) also teach us how lastingly upset the capacity has become to determine whether a perception corresponds to an inner or an outer reality. With the long withdrawing roar of the symbolic from architecture and the deformation of the difference of inside and outside, a short circuit between the imaginary and the real has taken the place of the law. Nobody knows any longer, to speak with Lacan, whether a door opens onto the imaginary or the real.<sup>59</sup> We have all become unhinged.

## Notes

1. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 1997), 40; translation slightly modified.
2. English in original—Trans.
3. Jacques Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955*, trans. John Forrester and Sylvana Tomaselli (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 47. See also, Friedrich Kittler, “The World of the Symbolic—A World of the Machine,” in *Literature, Media, Information Systems*, ed. John Johnston, trans. Stephanie Harris (Amsterdam: Routledge, 1997), 130–146.
4. For example, in the cave at Pech Merle in southwestern France is a representation of the step-by-step metamorphosis of a bison into a woman. See André Leroi-Gourhan, *Treasures of Prehistoric Art*, trans. Norbert Guterman (New York: Abrams, 1967), 420 images 368–371; see also, 521.
5. Gottfried Semper, *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten, oder Praktische Ästhetik* (Frankfurt: Verlag für Kunst und Wissenschaft, 1860), 1:227.
6. See, especially, Dirk Baecker, “Die Dekonstruktion der Schachtel: Innen und Außen in der Architektur,” in *Unbeobachtbare Welt: Über Kunst und Architektur*, ed. Niklas Luhmann, Fredrick D. Bunsen, and Dirk Baecker (Bielefeld, Germany: Cordula Haux, 1990), 67–104, esp. 83.
7. Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001), 150.
8. Georg Simmel, “Bridge and Door,” in *Simmel on Culture*, ed. David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (London: Sage, 2000), 170–174. “Precisely because [the door] can be opened, its closure provides the feeling of a stronger isolation against everything outside this space than the mere unstructured wall. The latter is mute, but the door speaks” (172).
9. Baecker, “Die Dekonstruktion der Schachtel,” 91.
10. Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1961), 48–49. Mumford’s theory of the city, however, does not treat walls and gates as primordial. Instead, he starts from the citadel.
11. See Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City: A Study of the Religion, Laws, and Institutions of Greece and Rome*, trans. Willard Small (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1874), 181–182.
12. Cornelia Vismann, *Files*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 15.
13. Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. G.L. Ulmen (New York: Telos, 2003), 70.
14. See Wolfgang Schäffner, “Punto, línea, abertura: Elementos para una historia medial de la arquitectura y del diseño” (inaugural lecture for the Walter Gropius Chair, University of Buenos Aires, 2003–2004).
15. Franz Kafka, “Before the Law,” in *The Complete Stories* (New York: Schocken, 1983), 3.
16. Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory*, 302.
17. Cicero, *De natura deorum*, 2:27, quoted in “Thyra,” in *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaften: Neue Bearbeitung*, ed. Georg Wissowa, Wilhelm Kroll, and Karl Mittelhaus (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1936), 2nd ser., halbbd. 11, 740.
18. J.A. MacCulloch, “Door,” *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (New



York: Scribners, 1912), 4:846.

19. Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (London: Routledge, 1977), 20.

20. The *pomerium* is the buffer zone inside or outside a Roman city wall in which no buildings could be built—Trans.

21. See Kurt Klusemann, *Das Bauopfer: Eine ethnographisch-prähistorisch-linguistische Studie* (Graz: n. pub., 1919).

22. Marcel Griaule, “Seuil,” *Documents: Archéologie, Beaux-Arts, Ethnographie, Variétés* 2 (1930): 103.

23. Van Gennep, 20.

24. See Charles Perrault, *La barbe bleue* (The Hague, 1742), 11–12.

25. Jacques Lacan, “The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious; or Reason since Freud,” in *Écrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 174. [Elsewhere Siegert emphasizes the nautical metaphor implicit in this famous dictum in his *Passage des Digitalen* (Berlin: Brinkmann und Bose, 2003), 417—Trans.]

26. Perrault, 13.

27. See Robin Evans, “Figures, Doors, Passages,” *Architectural Design* 4 (1978): 267–278.

28. Lydie Fischer Sarazin-Levassor, *A Marriage in Check: The Heart of the Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelor, Even*, trans. Paul Edwards (Dijon: Les Presses du Reel, 2007), 68. See also, Jennifer Gough-Cooper and Jacques Caumont, eds., *Effemeridi su e intorno a Marcel Duchamp e Rose Selavy* (Milan: Bompiani, 1993).

29. The proverb is from a comedy by Palaprat and Brueys: *Le grondeur* (1691). An 1845 play by Alfred de Musset, which belongs to his “Proverbes” series, has the title *Il faut qu’une porte soit ouverte ou fermée*.

30. Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory*, 302.

31. Marcel Duchamp, “Interview mit Michel Sanouillet (1954),” in *Marcel Duchamp: Interviews und Statements*, ed. Serge Stauffer (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 1992), 50.

32. Jean van Heekeren and Jacques-H. Lévesque, “La porte de Duchamp,” *Orbes* 2, no. 2 (Summer 1933): xiv.

33. Duchamp, “Interview mit Michel Sanouillet (1954),” 50.

34. In a conversation with Pierre Cabanne, Duchamp reports on the fate of the door. In 1963 Duchamp purchased the door from his landlady for about twenty dollars and shipped it to the United States, where it became part of the Mary Sisler collection. See Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), 78. Since then the “porte de Duchamp” has been art. In 1965 it was shown in New York as part of the exhibition *Not Seen and/or Less Seen of/by Marcel Duchamp/Rose Sélavy, 1904–1964*. Under the heading of “Door: 11, rue Larrey” it was entered as no. 426 in the catalog of Duchamp’s works. See Arturo Schwartz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, vol. 2 (1969; repr., New York: Delano Greenbridge Editions, 1997), 717. The *Critical Catalogue Raisonné* holds as no. 507 the reproduction of a drawing by Duchamp of the door. See Schwartz, 778.

35. Jacques Lacan, “Introduction [to the seminar on E.A. Poe’s ‘Purloined Letter’],” in *Écrits* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966), 46.

36. Robert Musil, “Doors and Portals,” in *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, trans. Peter

Wortzman (London: Penguin, 1995), 59.

37. James Clerk Maxwell, "Letter to Peter Guthrie Tait, 11 December 1867," in *The Scientific Letters and Papers of James Clerk Maxwell*, ed. P.M. Harman (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 2: 331.

38. Musil, "Doors and Portals," 59–60.

39. Adorno, 39.

40. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 105; translation slightly modified.

41. Adorno, 38.

42. Paul Virilio, *Fahren, fahren, fahren . . .*, trans. Ulrich Raulff (Berlin: Merve Verlag, 1978), 32.

43. Adorno, 39.

44. Mark Augé, *Nonplaces: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995).

45. Robert Venturi, Steven Izenour, and Denise Scott Brown, *Learning from Las Vegas*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), 49.

46. See Lorenz Engell, "Hulots Objekte: Dinge als Medien in den Filmen Jacques Tatis," in *Carte Blanche: Mediale Formate in der Kunst der Moderne*, ed. Silke Walther (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2007), 47–61.

47. Musil, "Doors and Portals," 62.

48. See James Buzard, "Perpetual Revolution," *Modernism/modernity* 8, no. 4 (2001): 559–581.

49. Van Kannel quoted in Buzard, "Perpetual Revolution," 561.

50. *Semper*, 2:109.

51. See Victor I. Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting*, trans. Anne-Marie Glasheen (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 48–49.

52. Adorno, 40; trans. slightly modified.

53. See Jim Johnson [Bruno Latour], "Mixing Humans and Nonhumans Together: The Sociology of a Door-Closer," *Social Problems* 35, no. 3 (1988): 298–310.

54. Adorno, 40.

55. Achim Pietzcker, "Schiebetür," *Arch+ : Zeitschrift für Architektur und Städtebau* 191/192 (2009): 91.

56. English in original—Trans.

57. Pietzcker, 91.

58. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Psychoses: 1955–1956*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 1997), 150.

59. Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory*, 302.