

The Naysayers

Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and the critique of pop culture.

BY ALEX ROSS

In Jonathan Franzen's 2001 novel, "The Corrections," a disgraced academic named Chip Lambert, who has abandoned Marxist theory in favor of screenwriting, goes to the Strand Bookstore, in downtown Manhattan, to sell off his library of dialectical tomes. The works of Theodor W. Adorno, Jürgen Habermas, Fredric Jameson, and various others cost Chip nearly four thousand dollars to acquire; their resale value is sixty-five. "He turned away from their reproachful spines, remembering how each of them had called out in a bookstore with a promise of a radical critique of late-capitalist society," Franzen writes. After several more book-selling expeditions, Chip enters a high-end grocery store and walks out with an overpriced filet of wild Norwegian salmon.

Anyone who underwent a liberal-arts education in recent decades probably encountered the thorny theorists associated with the Institute for Social Research, better known as the Frankfurt School. Their minatory titles, filled with dark talk of "Negative Dialectics" and "One-Dimensional Man," were once proudly displayed on college-dorm shelves, as markers of seriousness; now they are probably consigned to taped-up boxes in garages, if they have not been discarded altogether. Once in a while, the present-day Web designer or business editor may open the books and see in the margins the excited queries of a younger self, next to pronouncements on the order of "There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (Walter Benjamin) or "The whole is the false" (Adorno).

In the nineteen-nineties, the period in which "The Corrections" is set, such dire sentiments were unfashionable. With the fall of the Soviet Union, free-market capitalism had triumphed, and no one seemed badly hurt. In light of recent events, however, it may be time to unpack those texts again. Economic and environmental crisis, terrorism and counterterrorism, deepening inequality, unchecked tech and media monopolies, a withering away of intellectual institutions, an ostensibly liberating Internet culture in which we are constantly checking to see if we are being watched: none of this would have surprised the prophets of Frankfurt, who, upon reaching America, failed to experience the sensation of entering Paradise. Watching newsreels of the Second World War, Adorno wrote, "Men are reduced to walk-on parts in a monster documentary film which has no spectators, since the least of them has his bit to do on the screen." He would not revise his remarks now.

The philosophers, sociologists, and critics in the Frankfurt School orbit, who are often gathered under the broader label of Critical Theory, are, indeed, having a modest resurgence. They are cited in brainy magazines like *n+1*, *The Jacobin*, and the latest iteration of *The Baffler*. Evgeny Morozov, in his critiques of Internet boosterism, has quoted Adorno's early mentor Siegfried Kracauer, who registered the information and entertainment overload of the nineteen-twenties. The novelist Benjamin Kunkel, in his recent essay collection "Utopia or Bust," extolls the criticism of Jameson, who has taught Marxist literary theory at Duke University for decades. (Kunkel also mentions "The Corrections," noting that Chip gets his salmon at a shop winkingly named the Nightmare of Consumption.) The critic Astra Taylor, in "The People's Platform: Taking Back Power and Culture

in the Digital Age,” argues that Adorno and Max Horkheimer, in their 1944 book “Dialectic of Enlightenment,” gave early warnings about corporations “drowning out democracy in pursuit of profit.” And Walter Benjamin, whose dizzyingly varied career skirted the edges of the Frankfurt collective, receives the grand treatment in “Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life” (Harvard), by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, who earlier edited Harvard’s four-volume edition of Benjamin’s writings.

The Frankfurt School, which arose in the early nineteen-twenties, never presented a united front; it was, after all, a gaggle of intellectuals. One zone in which they clashed was that of mass culture. Benjamin saw the popular arena as a potential site of resistance, from which left-leaning artists like Charlie Chaplin could transmit subversive signals. Adorno and Horkheimer, by contrast, viewed pop culture as an instrument of economic and political control, enforcing conformity behind a permissive screen. The “culture industry,” as they called it, offered the “freedom to choose what is always the same.” A similar split appeared in attitudes toward traditional forms of culture: classical music, painting, literature. Adorno tended to be protective of them, even as he exposed their ideological underpinnings. Benjamin, in his resonant sentence linking culture and barbarism, saw the treasures of bourgeois Europe as spoils in a victory procession, each work blemished by the suffering of nameless millions.

The debate reached its height in the wake of Benjamin’s 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” a masterpiece of contingent optimism that praises mass culture only insofar as mass culture advances radical politics. Many readers will sympathize with Benjamin, who managed to uphold a formidable critical tradition while opening himself to the modern world and writing in a sensuous voice. He furnishes a template for the pop-savvy intellectual, the preferred model in what remains of literary life. Yet Adorno, his dark-minded, infuriating brother, will not go away: his cross-examination of the “Work of Art” essay, his pinpointing of its moments of naïveté, strikes home. Between them, Adorno and Benjamin were pioneers in thinking critically about pop culture—in taking that culture seriously as an object of scrutiny, whether in tones of delight, dismay, or passionate ambivalence.

The worst that one Frankfurt School theorist could say of another was that his work was insufficiently dialectical. In 1938, Adorno said it of Benjamin, who fell into a months-long depression. The word “dialectic,” as elaborated in the philosophy of Hegel, causes endless problems for people who are not German, and even for some who are. In a way, it is both a philosophical concept and a literary style. Derived from the ancient Greek term for the art of debate, it indicates an argument that maneuvers between contradictory points. It “mediates,” to use a favorite Frankfurt School word. And it gravitates toward doubt, demonstrating the “power of negative thinking,” as Herbert Marcuse once put it. Such twists and turns come naturally in the German language, whose sentences are themselves plotted in swerves, releasing their full meaning only with the final clinching action of the verb.

Marx adapted Hegel’s dialectic to the economic sphere, seeing it as an engine of progress. By the early twenties, a Marxist-Leninist state had ostensibly emerged in Russia, but the early members of the Frankfurt School—notably, Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Friedrich Pollock, Erich Fromm, Franz Neumann, and Leo Lowenthal—were far from starry-eyed about it. Although Marx was central to their thought, they were nearly as skeptical of Communist ideology as they

were of the bourgeois mind-set that Communism was intended to supplant. “At the very heart of Critical Theory was an aversion to closed philosophical systems,” Martin Jay writes, in his history “The Dialectical Imagination” (1973).

Nazism sundered the lives of the critical theorists, almost all of whom were Jewish. Benjamin committed suicide on the Franco-Spanish border, in 1940; the others escaped to America. Much of their work in exile focussed on totalitarianism, although they assessed the phenomenon from a certain remove. For them, the genocidal state was not merely a German problem, something that resulted from listening to too much Wagner; it was a Western problem, rooted in the Enlightenment urge to dominate nature. Raymond Geuss, in the preface to a new edition of the Frankfurt School’s U.S.-government-sponsored wartime intelligence reports, notes that Nazi Germany, with its barrage of propaganda and of regulated entertainment, was seen as an “archetypally modern society.” Anti-Semitism was, from this perspective, not merely a manifestation of hatred but a means to an end—a “spearhead” of societal control. Therefore, the defeat of Mussolini and Hitler, in 1945, fell short of a final defeat of Fascism: the totalitarian mind lurked everywhere, and America was hardly free of its influence.

Chronically disapproving as these thinkers were, they were not disengaged from the culture of their day. In order to dissect it, they bent over it. One great contribution that they made to the art of criticism was the idea that any object, no matter how seemingly trivial, was worth a searching glance. In the second volume of the Harvard Benjamin edition, covering the turbulent final years of the Weimar Republic, Benjamin variously analyzes Mickey Mouse (“In these films, mankind makes preparations to survive civilization”), children’s books and toys, a food fair, Charlie Chaplin, hashish, and pornography (“Just as Niagara Falls feeds power stations, in the same way the downward torrent of language into smut and vulgarity should be used as a mighty source of energy to drive the dynamo of the creative act”). You often feel a tension between the intensity of the scrutiny and the modesty of the subject, as if an electron microscope were being used to read the fine print on a contract. Adorno, during his American exile, took it upon himself to analyze astrology columns in the Los Angeles Times. Upon reading the advice “Accept all invitations,” he hyperventilates: “The consummation of this trend is the obligatory participation in official ‘leisure-time activities’ in totalitarian countries.”

Benjamin took a different tack. In his maturity, he struggled to reconcile materialist and theological concerns: on the one hand, the Marxist tradition of social critique; on the other, the messianic tradition that preoccupied the Jewish historian Gershom Scholem, a close friend from student days. (The struggle yielded Benjamin’s most famous image, in the 1940 “Theses on the Philosophy of History”: the “angel of history” who is blown backward into the future by the storm of progress.) The messianic urge set off sparks of mystical hope that were fundamentally foreign to Adorno. Tellingly, when Benjamin addressed the subject of astrology, he was more sympathetic than censorious, seeing it as evidence of a largely extinct identification with nature: “Modern man can be touched by a pale shadow of this on southern moonlit nights in which he feels, alive within himself, mimetic forces that he had thought long since dead.”

To read the biographies of Benjamin and Adorno side by side—Eiland and Jennings’s new book, seven hundred and sixty-eight pages long, takes a place on the shelf next to Stefan Müller-Doohm’s hardly less massive 2003 life of Adorno—is to see the fraying of the grand old European

bourgeoisie. Benjamin was born in Berlin in 1892; his father, Emil Benjamin, was an increasingly successful entrepreneur, his mother something of a grande dame. “Berlin Childhood Around 1900,” the most lyrical of Benjamin’s works, conjures the sumptuousness of his family home, although his all-seeing eye pierces its burnished surface: “As I gazed at the long, long rows of coffee spoons and knife rests, fruit knives and oyster forks, my pleasure in this abundance was tinged with anxiety, lest the guests we had invited would turn out to be identical to one another, like our cutlery.”

Adorno was born in Frankfurt in 1903, in conditions of comparable ease. His father, Oscar Wiesengrund, ran a wine-merchant business, and his mother, Maria Calvelli-Adorno, had sung opera. From earliest childhood, Adorno, as he chose to call himself on leaving Germany, swam in music, forming ambitions to become a composer. “Early on, I learned to disguise myself in words,” Benjamin wrote. Adorno hid in sounds.

Benjamin had the more complicated personality. Staggeringly intelligent, he was so consumed by the life of the mind that he routinely lost track of reality. Even Scholem found him “fanatically closed off.” At the same time, Benjamin indulged in bohemian tendencies: gambling, prostitutes, drinking, drugs. After failing to win an academic position, he took on journalistic assignments, coming to prefer “inconspicuous forms” over the “pretentious, universal gesture of the book.” His family life was disorderly. Those who picture him as an innocent martyr, poring over Baudelaire as history closes in on him, may be disheartened to read of his callous treatment of his wife, Dora Sophie, from whom he begged money while conducting a string of “smutty affairs,” as Dora put it. “All he is at this point is brains and sex,” she wrote.

Adorno, a canner and less conflicted character, established himself in academia, writing dissertations on Husserl and Kierkegaard. He also studied composition with Alban Berg, one of the supreme musical figures of the twentieth century. Adorno was industrious, imperious, brusquely brilliant—the picture of the child prodigy who never fully grows up. But there was a bohemian strain in him, too. Kracauer, who began guiding Adorno when the latter was still of high-school age, wrote an autobiographical novel called “Georg” in which Adorno appears as a “little prince” named Fred, or Freddie. (Adorno was nicknamed Teddie.) Georg and Freddie go to all-night fancy-dress balls and one night end up in bed together, hovering on the edge of erotic contact.

Benjamin and Adorno met in Frankfurt in the early twenties, when Adorno was still a university student. At first, Adorno acted like a Benjamin disciple, virtuosically interrogating culture high and low. Later, he behaved more as master than as follower, subjecting Benjamin’s work to sometimes scathing criticism. In the new biography, Adorno comes across as a petty enforcer, trying to make Benjamin conform to Frankfurt School norms. Yet Eiland and Jennings may misunderstand the give-and-take of the relationship. In one letter, Adorno urges Benjamin to stop paying halfhearted tribute to Marxist concepts and instead to pursue a more idiosyncratic vision. Benjamin, for his part, was no hapless victim. When Adorno sent along a scenario for an ill-conceived music-theatre piece based on Mark Twain, Benjamin’s unconcealed disdain—“I believe I can imagine what you were attempting here”—probably caused Adorno to abandon the project. The two served each other best by challenging assumptions at every turn; it was a mutual admonition society.

With the advent of the Nazis, Benjamin left Germany at once, taking up residence primarily in France. Adorno, whose post-doctoral thesis was published the day Hitler took power, hesitated to break from Germany, occasionally making slight gestures of accommodation with the regime. When his part-Jewish ancestry made his position impossible, he settled for a time in Oxford. In 1935, Horkheimer took the Institute for Social Research to New York; in 1938, Adorno reluctantly joined him. He and his wife, Gretel, urged Benjamin to follow them, casting New York in a seductive light. In one letter, Adorno announces that Seventh Avenue in the Village “reminds us of boulevard Montparnasse.” Gretel adds, “There is no need to search for the surreal here, for one stumbles over it at every step.” Presciently, though, she anticipates that Benjamin will be unable to leave Paris: “I fear you are so fond of your arcades that you cannot part with their splendid architecture.”

She was referring to the “Arcades Project,” Benjamin’s would-be magnum opus—a kaleidoscopic study centered on the glass-covered shopping arcades of nineteenth-century Paris, intermingling literary analysis and cultural history with semi-Marxist sociology. At the heart of the scheme was Baudelaire, the prototype of the compromised modern artist, who casts off the mask of genius and surrenders to the life of the street. Baudelaire is depicted as a ragpicker, cobbling poetry from discarded fragments. At the same time, he stands apart from the crowd, enacting a ceremony of “mourning for what was and lack of hope for what is to come.” Baudelaire’s fascinated indecision in the face of nascent popular culture mirrors Benjamin’s own. The fact that the “Arcades Project” never came to fruition—a magnificent chaos of materials was published in English in 1999—suggests that, for this most hypersensitive of thinkers, the ambivalence was paralyzing.

When Benjamin committed suicide, apparently in the mistaken belief that he could not leave Nazi-occupied France, he carried with him an American entry visa, which the Institute for Social Research had obtained for him. It is hard to picture what might have happened if he had made it to New York—or, for that matter, to Jerusalem, where Scholem tried to get him to settle. The story might still have ended sadly: Eiland and Jennings emphasize that Benjamin had been tempted by suicide long before the cataclysm of 1940. Adorno, for his part, eked out a living at various institutes and think tanks in America, and when he returned to Frankfurt, in 1949, he became a monument of German intellectual life. He died in 1969, of a heart attack, after a hike in the shadow of the Matterhorn.

Last year, the German publisher Suhrkamp, as part of its ongoing critical edition of Benjamin’s works, released a volume devoted entirely to “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility.” It contains five distinct versions of the essay and related manuscripts, dating from the years 1935 to 1940, and four hundred pages of commentary. Benjamin might have scorned the scholarly fuss, but he knew the value of what he had achieved. The essay’s governing question, about what it means to create or consume art when any work can be mechanically reproduced, has grown ever more pressing in the digital age, when Bach’s complete cantatas or the Oxford English Dictionary can be downloaded in moments. In Benjamin’s lifetime, intellectuals busied themselves debating whether the new forms—photography, film, radio, popular music—constituted art. Benjamin pushed past such panel-discussion topics to the more fundamental issue of how technology changed all forms, ancient and contemporary.

First, Benjamin introduces the concept of the “aura,” which he defines as the “here and now of the artwork—its unique existence in a particular place.” To know Leonardo or Rembrandt, one must be in a room with their paintings. Chartres exists only at Chartres. The journey toward art resembles a pilgrimage. The treasures of the canon have always been embedded in ritual, whether it is medieval dogma or the “art for art’s sake” theology of the nineteenth century. In the age of reproduction, however, aura decays. When copies compete with originals, and when new works are produced with technology in mind, the old values of “creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery” fall away. Far from lamenting this development, Benjamin hails it: “For the first time in world history, technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual.”

Free of that velvet prison, art can assume a political role. Benjamin’s dream of a radicalized mass culture emerged, in part, from his conversations with Bertolt Brecht, who believed that popular media could be marshalled to revolutionary ends, as in his and Kurt Weill’s “The Threepenny Opera.” Benjamin called the process “reception in distraction,” meaning that the masses can internalize, say, Chaplin’s images of a mechanized dehumanization and begin to question the rules of society. These spectators approach watching a film not as supplicants before an altar; rather, they take pleasure in the images and appraise them critically. They do not passively contemplate; they are alert eyewitnesses. Indeed, in the documentary films of Dziga Vertov, the masses themselves become actors, and the divide between author and public disintegrates. Benjamin’s essay is furiously perceptive, although he never quite specifies how a filmmaker can sustain an explicitly radical agenda within the commercial mainstream. Chaplin’s decision to flee to Europe in the fifties illustrates the difficulty.

When Adorno read “The Work of Art,” he readily accepted the concept of the aura and its decay. Unsentimental about his own highbrow milieu, he had already done his bit to puncture the affectations of bourgeois aesthetics, and in particular the fantasy that classical music floats above society, in an apolitical haze. In the 1932 essay “On the Social Situation of Music,” Adorno wrote, “The same type of conductor who undertakes an insatiably engrossed celebration of the Adagio of Bruckner’s Eighth lives a life closely akin to that of the head of a capitalist combine, uniting in his hand as many organizations, institutes, and orchestras as possible.” Later in the decade, in the study “In Search of Wagner,” Adorno depicted the composer of the “Ring” as a master illusionist and a harbinger of Fascism.

Benjamin’s pivot toward popular culture was, however, another matter. In a 1936 letter, Adorno complained that his friend had too cavalierly consigned bourgeois art to the “counter-revolutionary” category, failing to see that independent spirits—the likes of, say, Berg, Pablo Picasso, and Thomas Mann—could still carve out a space of expressive freedom. (Adorno believed that Benjamin was too much under the spell of Brecht, who appeared ready to cast highbrow forms on the rubbish heap.) Benjamin, Adorno said in his letter, had “startled art out of every one of its tabooed hiding places,” but he was in danger of falling under new illusions, romanticizing film and other pop forms. Adorno wrote, “If anything can be said to possess an auratic character now, it is precisely the film which does so, and to an extreme and highly suspect degree.” The cinema was the new Chartres, a venue of communal rapture.

This is an insight as profound as any found in Benjamin's essay. Pop culture was acquiring its own cultic aspect, one neatly configured for technological dissemination. Why, after all, would the need for ritual subside when the economic system remained the same? (Benjamin once wrote, "Capitalism is a purely cultic religion, perhaps the most extreme that ever existed.") Celebrities were rising to the status of secular gods: publicity stills froze their faces in the manner of religious icons. Pop musicians elicited Dionysian screams as they danced across the altar of the stage. And their aura became, in a sense, even more magical: instead of drawing pilgrims from afar, the pop masterpiece is broadcast outward, to a captive world congregation. It radiates and saturates.

When Adorno issued his own analyses of pop culture, though, he went off the beam. He was too irritated by the new Olympus of celebrities—and, even more, by the enthusiasm they inspired in younger intellectuals—to give a measured view. In the wake of "The Work of Art," Adorno published two essays, "On Jazz," and "On the Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening," that ignored the particulars of pop sounds and instead resorted to crude generalizations. Notoriously, Adorno compares jitterbugging to "St. Vitus' dance or the reflexes of mutilated animals." He shows no sympathy for the African-American experience, which was finding a new platform through jazz and popular song. The writing is polemical, and not remotely dialectical.

In the 1936 letter to Benjamin, Adorno offers a subtler argument—more of a plea for parity. Commercial logic is triumphant, he says, ensnaring culture high and low: "Both bear the stigmata of capitalism, both contain elements of change. . . . Both are torn halves of an integral freedom to which, however, they do not add up. It would be romantic to sacrifice one for the other." In particular, it would be a mistake to romanticize the new mass forms, as Benjamin seems to do in his mesmerizing essay. Adorno makes the opposite mistake of romanticizing bourgeois tradition by denying humanity to the alternative. The two thinkers are themselves torn halves of a missing picture. One collateral misfortune of Benjamin's early death is that it ended one of the richest intellectual conversations of the twentieth century.

If Adorno were to look upon the cultural landscape of the twenty-first century, he might take grim satisfaction in seeing his fondest fears realized. The pop hegemony is all but complete, its superstars dominating the media and wielding the economic might of tycoons. They live full time in the unreal realm of the mega-rich, yet they hide behind a folksy façade, wolfing down pizza at the Oscars and cheering sports teams from V.I.P. boxes. Meanwhile, traditional bourgeois genres are kicked to the margins, their demographics undesirable, their life styles uncool, their formal intricacies ill suited to the transmission networks of the digital age. Opera, dance, poetry, and the literary novel are still called "élitist," despite the fact that the world's real power has little use for them. The old hierarchy of high and low has become a sham: pop is the ruling party.

The Internet threatens final confirmation of Adorno and Horkheimer's dictum that the culture industry allows the "freedom to choose what is always the same." Champions of online life promised a utopia of infinite availability: a "long tail" of perpetually in-stock products would revive interest in non-mainstream culture. One need not have read Astra Taylor and other critics to sense that this utopia has been slow in arriving. Culture appears more monolithic than ever, with a few gigantic corporations—Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon—presiding over unprecedented monopolies. Internet discourse has become tighter, more coercive. Search engines

guide you away from peculiar words. (“Did you mean . . . ?”) Headlines have an authoritarian bark (“This Map of Planes in the Air Right Now Will Blow Your Mind”). “Most Read” lists at the top of Web sites imply that you should read the same stories everyone else is reading. Technology conspires with populism to create an ideologically vacant dictatorship of likes.

This, at least, is the drastic view. Benjamin’s heirs have suggested how messages of dissent can emanate from the heart of the culture industry, particularly in giving voice to oppressed or marginalized groups. Any narrative of cultural regression must confront evidence of social advance: the position of Jews, women, gay men, and people of color is a great deal more secure in today’s neo-liberal democracies than it was in the old bourgeois Europe. (The Frankfurt School’s indifference to race and gender is a conspicuous flaw.) The late Jamaican-born British scholar Stuart Hall, a pioneer of cultural studies, presented a double-sided picture of youth pop, defining it, in an essay co-written with Paddy Whannel, as a “contradictory mixture of the authentic and the manufactured.” In the same vein, the NPR pop critic Ann Powers wrote last month about listening to Nico & Vinz’s slickly soulful hit “Am I Wrong” in the wake of the unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, and catching the song’s undercurrents of unease. “Pop is all about commodification: the soft center of what adapts,” Powers writes. “But sometimes, when history collides with it, a simple song gains dimension.”

One way or another, the Frankfurt School mode of criticism—its skeptical ardor, its relentless scouring of mundane surfaces—has spread far. When online recappers expend thousands of words debating the depiction of rape on “Game of Thrones,” or when writers publish histories of sneakers or of the office cubicle, they show intense awareness of mass culture’s ability to shape society. And in some cases the analysis takes a recognizably dialectical turn, as in Hua Hsu’s 2011 essay, for Grantland, on Kanye West and Jay-Z’s album “Watch the Throne.” A dispassionate hip-hop fan, Hua Hsu ponders the spectacle of two leading rappers making an “album against austerity,” in which they mark their ascension to a world of “MoMA and Rothko, Larry Gagosian, and luxury hotels across three continents,” and at the same time forfeit a hip-hop tradition of fantasy and protest. Citing the Kanye track “Power”—“Grab a camera, shoot a viral / Take the power in your own hands”—Hsu writes, “This version of power is entrancing—it explains an entire generation. But it also confuses ubiquity for importance, the familiarity of a celebrity’s face for true authority.” There is no telling how Adorno and Benjamin might have negotiated such contemporary labyrinths. Perhaps, on a peaceful day, they would have accepted the compromise devised by Fredric Jameson, who has written that the “cultural evolution of late capitalism” can be understood “dialectically, as catastrophe and progress all together.”

These implacable voices should stay active in our minds. Their dialectic of doubt prods us to pursue connections between what troubles us and what distracts us, to see the riven world behind the seamless screen. “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism”: Benjamin’s great formula, as forceful as a Klieg light, should be fixed as steadily on pop culture, the ritual apparatus of American capitalism, as it has been on the art works of the European bourgeoisie. Adorno asked for only so much. Above all, these figures present a model for thinking differently, and not in the glib sense touted by Steve Jobs. As the homogenization of culture proceeds apace, as the technology of surveillance hovers at the borders of our brains, such spaces are becoming rarer and more confined. I am haunted by a sentence

from Virginia Woolf's "The Waves": "One cannot live outside the machine for more perhaps than half an hour."