Light Reading

Public Utility, Urban Fiction, and Human Rights

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> "The body, enlightened by electricity, was not docile, but ecstatic."
> —James Delbourgo, *A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders*

In the 2005 French action film *District B13*, in which Luc Besson offers up a merely vehicular script through which to showcase the spectacular acrobatics of Paris's (more accurately, the *banlieues* [suburbs] of Paris's) newest offering to choreographed martial-artistry, *parkour*, a cop, Damien (Cyril Rafaelli), and a badass *banlieusard* called Leïto (David Belle) square off in an abandoned factory in a Paris ghetto.[1] The cop shouts his abstract allegiance to the state: "Liberté, fraternité, égalité!" The ghetto youth responds with his material allegiance to the city's decaying slums: "Eau, gaz, électricité!" The battle begins, rages awesomely, and then ends in an alliance between the two characters when they realize, in the middle of the action, that they are on the same side after all, that the ideals of liberty, brotherhood, and freedom need to be unified with the material infrastructure of water, gas, and electricity for the ideals to have any real weight or meaning. The scene is a perfect reduction of the problem this essay addresses, the essential tension between democratization and modernization and, in particular, the status within global modernity of what I call, a little inexactly, public utilities: water, gas, and electricity.

It's not just the neat trinitarian fit between freedom-equality-brotherhood and water-gas-electricity that motivates Leïto's response to Damien. I suspect the relationship goes deeper linguistically. The French national slogan was derived later from the original 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. Article 1 of the declaration reads: "Les hommes

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naissent et demeurent libres et égaux en droits. Les distinctions sociales ne peuvent être fondées que sur l'utilité commune" (Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be based only on considerations of the common good). "L'utilité commune" usually gets translated into English as "the common good," but the idea of the "public utility" in the restricted sense—water, gas, electricity—is there: anachronistically, to be sure, but there in the sense that the term must have attached itself to modern "public utilities" from this origin. The story becomes rather complicated in this regard because the French do not usually refer to their "public utilities" as such (they call them "services publics"[2]), nor do the British (they say "utility," not "public utility"); but Americans do. So we might imagine a complex recirculation of the idea of the public utility, from British utilitarianism to the French Declaration, then to the American idiom and back, finally, to *District B13* and Leïto's utilitarian retort to Damien's lofty republicanism. In 1789 the "utilité commune" in article 1 was a kind of escape clause for social distinction; the "utility" of slavery, for example, justified its legal continuation for nearly seventy years after the Declaration. Now, however, the "public utility" points to something else, to what is arguably the most important "social distinction" of the twenty-first century: the divide between those who have public utilities and those who do not.

In her introductory article for the January 2007 *PMLA* dedicated to cities,[3] Patricia Yeager asks, "what is it like to be stuck, night and day, dreaming of infrastructure?"[4] The question emerges from the "premise" that "our intellectual apparatus, like the wage puzzle, is inadequate for describing the pleasures and pounding of most urban lives, or the fact that many city dwellers survive despite all odds."[5] Leïto is one of Yeager's dreamers, not just because he makes the demand for infrastructure in his speech; his practice, *parkour*, makes that demand palpable in movement, exemplifying the "pleasures and poundings" of urban life. *Parkour* was born in the decay and neglect of the Parisian suburb. Its name is a derivation of the French military *parcours*, or obstacle course, an obsession David Belle—*parkour*'s founder—picked up from his career-military father. Belle adapted *parcours* into a slum-urban art form something like break dancing, in which the *traceur*, as practitioners of *parkour* call themselves, leaps from rooftops, moves from building to building, jumps through windows, scales terraces and balconies. The *traceur* looks for anything and everything that can help him make his way—pipes, cables, windows, fire escapes, electric and telephone poles—and, as part of the challenge, makes a virtue of turning any obstacle in his path into a part of the path itself. Rock climbing for the dispossessed; the *traceur*, unlike the rock climber, must move both vertically and horizontally through a thoroughly lived-in though broken-down environment, crowded with others. A new and artistic "use" is made

of structures and infrastructures that no longer work; they are turned into part of the spectacle. And to the extent that *parkour* has made a name for itself in action cinema, the *traceur* is generally running for his life, from authorities of some kind, often enough the police. The physical grammar of *parkour* turns evading the police into a martial art and, by aestheticizing its choreography, into a fine art.

Belle had a partner in *parkour* boosterism early on, Sebastien Foucan,[6] who also makes some spectacular appearances on film, notably in the 2006 James Bond outing, *Casino Royale*.[7] There he plays Mollaka, an African terrorist-bomber whom Bond shoots at the end of the very first, very long, and very expensive chase scene in the film. Most of the scene takes place on a construction site, which, the film tells us only in textual overlay, is somewhere in Madagascar. "Madagascar" and "construction site" both function without specificity; we are located, as far as we need to know, in a development site in darkest underdeveloped Africa. Aside from the incredibly choreographed action in the sequence, far better than most action sequences in most films and by far the best thing about *Casino Royale*, what's interesting is the juxtaposition of styles between Mollaka as the third-world *traceur*-terrorist and Bond as the agent of Western power. Mollaka moves through this landscape of development without breaking anything, a fact that might go unnoticed were it not for Bond's destruction of everything that stands in his way. Mollaka jumps a high fence in what looks like one fluid and graceful gesture; Bond jumps in a bulldozer and plows through the fence, causing tremendous collateral damage in the process. Mollaka jumps feet first through a high transom window; Bond crashes through the wall the window is set in, pauses for effect covered in drywall dust, and continues the chase. There are many more examples. The point is that without giving us any actual context, the film codes the African Mollaka's movements to acknowledge Africa's desire and need for development. Mollaka doesn't break anything because this is, in a metaphorical sense, his home, his nation, or his continent. Bond breaks everything because he represents Western power and the systematic development of underdevelopment in the former colonial territories of the Western powers. He is just doing his job, which is not so much to stop terrorists as it is to destroy an "African" "construction site." This is the "cycle of creative destruction that permits the most exploitative forms of capitalism to thrive," which is how Yeager describes Naomi Klein's notion of "disaster capitalism."[8] Transnational capital is engaged by poor African country through IMF (International Monetary Fund) loans to develop Africa; Bond destroys construction site on pretext of terrorist threat; transnational capital is engaged by (now even poorer) poor African country through IMF loans to develop Africa; and so on. The secret agent

doesn't have a target or a goal; his mission is nothing more than ongoing destruction. Mollaka, on the other hand, traces Leïto's vocal demand for infrastructure—water, gas, electricity—in movement.

Parkour in *Casino Royale* renders Naomi Klein's "Disaster Capitalism" in spectacle.[9] *Parkour* in *District B13* renders Mike Davis's "Planet of Slums" in spectacle, a point to which I will soon return.[10] In both films *parkour* renders Yeager's "dream of infrastructure" in spectacle. But one thing that can't be rendered in film—imperfect medium!—is the "smell of infrastructure," as Bruce Robbins reminds us in his *boundary 2* essay of the same title.[11] Which is to say that what we need in order to follow Yeager's call for an "intellectual apparatus" adequate "for describing the pleasures and pounding of most urban lives" is a working phenomenology of infrastructure, something I propose limiting here to what Chris Otter calls a "phenomenology of public utilities,"[12] some method for accounting for the structures of feeling that the utility generates, and of which *parkour* is a popular kinetic expression.

Yeager's jumping-off point in "Dreaming of Infrastructure" is Mike Davis's seminal essay (and later, book) "Planet of Slums," which appeared in 2004 in *New Left Review*. There Davis proclaimed 2005 the watershed year in which the planet would have become urban as opposed to rural, since by that time demographers predicted that more than 50 percent of the world's population would be living in cities. He described the emergence of the mega- and hypercity, cities like Lagos and Mumbai, where population density and poverty levels were exponentially greater than anything first-world cities had ever experienced, and where, in the absence of infrastructural development to match the demographic explosion, a series of outlying shantytowns, *bidonvilles*, and favelas would sprout like fungi or cancer on the older, more structured city they surrounded and infiltrated. Critics in the humanities have been quick to take up Davis's sociohistorical work. Ashley Dawson and Brent Hayes Edwards's coedited special issue of *Social Text*, "Global Cities of the South," is one example;[13] Yeager's *PMLA* issue "Cities" another. Looming over this trend is yet another text: Patrick Chamoiseau's 1992 novel *Texaco*, translated into English in 1998,[14] which is set in a *bidonville* on the outskirts of Martinique's capital, Fort-de-France. Davis cites it, as do Dawson and Yeager, making it a kind of de facto representative literary text for the "Planet of Slums." While not representative of the new hypercities like São Paulo or Mexico City, the evolution of Fort-de-France is, in fact, exemplary of the demographic trend Davis is talking about, which involves not so much the hypercities that "have actually declined in relative share of urban population" as it does "secondary cities" with a population of between 100,000 and 500,000 inhabitants. In these places "urbanization must be conceptualized as

structural transformation along, and intensified interaction between, every point of an urban-rural continuum."[15]

In such places the new urban subject comes into being. As Ashley Dawson observes, that subject shares one principal characteristic, so that despite "the diminutive size of Martinique's capital . . . *Texaco*'s picaresque narrative records a paradigmatic experience for the many millions experiencing urbanization in the global South: displacement."[16] (It's worth noting here, in order to emphasize the connection between *parkour* and this new urban subject, that *traceurs* define *parkour* as "l'art de déplacement." The English translation, "the art of movement," drops the important vacillation between movement and displacement, just as "free running," the English translation of *parkour*, drops the important connections between *parkour*, military-style tactics, and forced as opposed to "free" displacement.) For Dawson the emergent subject of *Texaco* is, furthermore, the "squatter citizen," and it is this subject whose "struggles . . . for resources and legitimacy will define the form and character of the global cities of the South and, by extension, the shape of modernity in the twenty-first century."[17] There are thus several reasons for considering *Texaco*'s slum-urban vision as exemplary, to which I would add another: the novel's treatment of the public utility and, in particular, electricity.

"More light! More light!"
—Goethe's last words (apocryphal)

I wish to argue that electricity is central to *Texaco*'s telos as a kind of collective bildungsroman for the squatter citizen; and further, that *Texaco* gets taken up as representative of the literature of the Planet of Slums because the public utility—in the form of electricity—is the endpoint of the plot's development. *Texaco* is what we might call a postcolonial comedy; it has a happy ending. The shantytown of Texaco, slated for destruction by the municipal authorities of Fort-de-France, is saved through the efforts of the protagonist, Marie-Sophie, to get the settlement officially recognized by the city. She does this through a series of interviews with "the Urban Planner," who has come to survey the settlement and make his recommendation to the city, presumably to raze Texaco and relocate its inhabitants somewhere chosen, zoned, and chartered by city officials. But the story that Marie-Sophie recounts to the Urban Planner, the epic history and mythology of Texaco, converts him to her side, and through a combination of his efforts and Marie-Sophie's, Texaco is finally recognized by the city as a legitimate settlement. The final act of that process turns on the flow of municipal electricity into Texaco's homes. "The

E.D.F. [Electricité de France] appeared one day along the Pénétrante West [the new road from Fort-de-France into Texaco], stuck its poles, and plugged us some electricity. *It was an unblemished joy.* . . . City was from now on taking us under its wing and admitting our existence . . . city would integrate Texaco's soul . . . everything would be improved but . . . everything would remain in accordance with its fundamental law, with its alleys, places, with its so old memory which the country needed."[18]

"An unblemished joy." This is not the usual language of mourning, longing, loss, and struggle that characterizes the novel's tone and narrative arc, from slavery to abolition to urban migration to the founding of Texaco. Impossible to characterize, for example, abolition as an unblemished joy since its enactment almost automatically entails a remembering of the slave trade, of families broken, lives taken, years lost. This is the way *Texaco* in general remembers the past, so that an "unblemished joy" like the one Marie-Sophie describes here demands attention. Unblemished joys are not common in Texaco, and this is the only one to be found in *Texaco.* Nor, perhaps, ought this one to be taken without a suspicion of irony. But my gamble here is that "une joie sans faille," "an unblemished joy,"[19] says exactly what it means, and that explaining why this should be so is the key to understanding the novel as a whole. Coming as it does a few pages from the end of the novel, this moment is the culmination of the novel's telos. It is Leïto's demand in *District B13* made good. This is not independence *tout court* but, rather, recognition: "City was . . . taking us under its wing and admitting our existence." Not "freedom from," say, the impositions of City and the city's authorities, but freedom in them: "everything would be improved but . . . everything would remain in accordance with its fundamental law."

Taking the "unblemished joy" as an authentic feeling, however, does not mean that it is the right feeling, or that Marie-Sophie ought to take electricity as the unequivocal sign of recognition, as if the power supply could make up for centuries of oppression and exploitation. Could we not consider electricity as the sign merely of a giddy historical amnesia brought on by the thrill of admittance to consumer luxuries long denied "monetary subjects with no cash"?[20] We could, but again we would have to read Marie-Sophie, tough and dedicated as she is, as finally defeated, bought out by the comforts of commodity culture. And that won't do either; this moment of joy is altogether more complicated and is, moreover, intricately woven into the plotline of *Texaco.* It emerges proleptically at the moment when Marie-Sophie teaches herself to read with the cast-off books of her first employer in the city: "Caméléon Sainte-Claire offered me my first book (a technical manual which must have bored him). I used it to find this or that word, to spell it, to copy it, but never read it: it offered nothing but discussions of electricity, something about screws, wire, switches, and

volts and watts. It was from Monsieur Gros-Joseph himself that I would develop a taste for the books-to-read, devoid of pictures, in which writing becomes the sorcerer of the world."[21] The electricity book is her primer, in her description of it, for literature: high literature, world literature. Her disavowal of the importance of the intellectual value of electrical know-how, for which she swears she "never read," is meant to signal her intellectual ambition in the context of her shameful sense of her own ignorance. She goes so far as to equate "picture books" with child's play and to equate books "devoid of pictures" and dense with text with intellectual maturity: a touchingly naive distinction that is instantly recognizable as the young upstart's aggressive insecurity. Not for her the tradesman's knowledge of "screws, wire, switches, and volts and amps." This is plebian knowledge compared to the transcendence of great literature. And yet, of course, the culminating passage of *Texaco* gives the lie to such a position by depicting the "unblemished joy" that comes with the turning on of the current, the connection to, and the recognition by, City. And we can see, even in the way that she characterizes high literature as "the sorcerer of the world," that electricity is already the metaphor through which she comes to understand literature's effects on her. This metaphor only becomes more pronounced as she puts more and more "good" books in front of her memory of her first book: the process by which the metaphor of electricity, through time, distance, and forgetfulness, becomes a commonplace or cliché. Her literary education continues and deepens with her second employer, Monsieur Gros-Joseph:

> With him I embarked upon the unknown world of books. . . . when circumstances lent themselves, I skimmed many books, read lots of poems, bits of paragraphs, spellbinding moments. To Gros-Joseph's great despair, I could never tell what was by whom, nor if someone was worth more than another. For me, each book released an aroma, a voice, a time, a moment, a pain, a presence; each book cast a light or burdened me with its shadow; I was terrified feeling these souls, tied up in one hum, crackling under my fingers.[22]

In the "one hum" and in the "crackling under [her] fingers," we cannot help but hear the echo of that first book about electricity, the buzz of watts and volts and wires and switches. The electricity of her first book is a current that runs through all her subsequent reading of literature—again, despite her claim never to have read it. This formative reading experience is also a genealogy of a metaphor. For Marie-Sophie, reading is an electrifying experience, first as a matter of fact, later as a matter of feeling. The metaphor of literature as somehow electrifying is in *Texaco* traced back to its origin, which for Marie-Sophie is very literal: the electrician's handbook. And at an intermediate distance from the electrician and the writer as "sorcerer[s] of the world"—between the artisan and the artist—is the

politician, the very role that Marie-Sophie fulfills for her constituents in Texaco. "I proposed a plan which everyone adopted," she recounts, "to pay a visit to [Aimé] Césaire, not to the town council where his dogs kept watch, but at his home. . . . There I would speak to him about getting us water, electricity, a path over the mud, solid steps, cement scuppers. The thing was voted through by the women (the men thinking us basically crazy but avoiding opposing me)."[23]

The approach on Césaire's private life is also, in the end, a literary approach. Marie-Sophie gets him to listen to her only after she has recited (as she says, "with all the energy in the world") a few lines from his "Notebook of a Return to a Native Land," lines whose central trope has to do with reconceptualizing the cosmos as centered on humankind and its intentions: "and room there is for all at the rendezvous with conquest and we now know that the sun revolves around our earth, lighting the parcel that only our will has fixed and that any star shall plummet from sky to earth at our limitless command."[24] Again, electricity seems to be the point of these lines, at least in isolation. More than just proving her literacy and her familiarity with Césaire's poetry, Marie-Sophie chooses—perhaps without intention, just as she "read" the electricity book—a passage that poetically expresses exactly what she is asking for: a star to light a parcel that her will has fixed.

This intervention yields quick results. Césaire convinces the city authorities to run water into Texaco. But still, no electricity. He is impressed by Marie-Sophie's recitation, but not convinced. "Tell me, Madame Laborieux, have you read the *Notebook*? Or is it just a quotation that . . . " he begins to ask her as she is about to leave him. "I read it, Monsieur Césaire," she interrupts, but then concludes on reflection that "he must not have believed me."[25] We are just short of recognition here, just short of the "unblemished joy" of electricity; water doesn't satisfy. Texaco's residents are driven by its dream, and so is Marie-Sophie, though she dissimulates by pretending to act merely as their representative.

> As he climbs the tree, the macaque is never happy with his fate: *more committee sessions were demanded of me to study the question of electricity*. Ti-Cirique, the secretary, had dispatched thirty-and-three missives to the director of SPEDEM [presently EDF], but that personage had not even bothered to reply: Texaco did not exist for him. I went down to see him once and tried to force my way into his office. Another time, we went there at night and smeared his walls with our demands. But it was like pissing on a violin to make it play.[26]

Marie-Sophie is now obliged to "study the question of electricity," something that, though she would pretend otherwise, she has already been doing for quite some time, both literally and literarily. To admit it openly,

she feigns disinterest. You can almost hear the sigh of resignation from the put-upon politician bowing to the demands of her clamorous constituents, combining with the sharp edge of the thinly veiled insult likening them to greedy monkeys. And again, Marie-Sophie's language couples recognition (in the Hegelian and Fanonian senses) to electricity: "Texaco did not exist for him [the director of SPEDEM]." When Césaire fails to recognize Marie-Sophie, it is because he doesn't believe she can read; when SPEDEM's director fails to recognize her, it is because he doesn't know how to read the demands she and her constituents have "smeared" or written on his walls. In both cases, the novel is making electricity the sign of recognition, intimately tied into the questions of translation, literacy, and literature, and setting us up for the "unblemished joy" at the end: something that Marie-Sophie, along with her political opponents, also fails to recognize.

Recognition between the city and Texaco is established at the moment the city "plugs" Texaco electricity. But it is important that Marie-Sophie, even in the unblemished joy of electrical amnesia, never recognizes the connection between her literary education, the institution of the public utility, and the narrative thread of her adult life. The moment of unblemished joy is not a moment of psychological realization, and in that sense we might call it an epiphany in the Joycean sense of the word: something that the reader and writer are in on, while the protagonist remains either entirely unaware of the significance of the moment or unaware of the real meaning of the significant moment. The connection between her first book and *Texaco*'s "unblemished joy" is unconscious for her, or perhaps even repressed, but it is nevertheless a central and intentional structure of the novel. Marie-Sophie participates in the "unblemished joy" while not fully understanding why she's feeling it. She fails or refuses to see what is patently "there" for the writer and the reader of *Texaco*. Why? Wouldn't it make sense to develop a protagonist who comes to understand the narrative arc of her life as a kind of personal development whose events come together, finally, to form an intelligible story of characterological fulfillment?

[E]lle a tellement pénétré le quotidien, qu'on sait l'électricité sans le savoir."
(So much has it penetrated daily life, that one knows electricity without knowing one knows it.)
— Marie-Odile Briot, quoted in Andrew Leach, "Electricity, Writing, Architecture"

Marie-Sophie's failure to recognize her own developmental telos has at least two possible explanations. The first is to be found in one of the essential generic conventions of the bildungsroman. Joseph Slaughter

has described this convention as a "temporal contortion" common to the form in which "the novel concludes where it began after bringing the past into conjunction with the present and the earlier protagonist self into correspondence with the later narrative self, producing the *Bildungsheld* as the narrator-protagonist (citizen-subject) of its story."[27] Such is the micronarrative arc of Marie-Sophie's experience from her first book about electricity to Texaco's recognition through electricity. Of course, Marie-Sophie differs fundamentally from the traditional *Bildungsheld*, or "*Bildungs*-hero"; first of all she's a she, and she is a part of the first generation of Africans in the Caribbean born after the abolition of slavery. This is to say that she is one of the first of her people for whom some relationship to the state—beyond the absolute command of obedience and the absolute threat of death—is even possible. Nevertheless, *Texaco* seems to follow the same developmental narrative as the European bildungsroman with the crucial qualification that, rather than remaining fixated on the personal development of an individual protagonist, *Texaco*'s narrative opens up—explicitly—to a collective or corporate development narrative; Marie-Sophie's story turns out to be the story of a storyteller, and the protagonist turns out to be Texaco as a whole.

Slaughter focuses on the German tradition of the bildungsroman. But Marie-Sophie mentions James Joyce as one of her favorite authors several times in *Texaco*, and I think that we might look to his bildungsroman, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*,[28] for some more specific, less generic, reasons for Marie-Sophie's knowledge deficit vis-à-vis her writer and her readers.[29] As a boy coming into language, Stephen Dedalus has a childish fascination with the public utility. We see him in chapter 1 contemplating the waterspouts marked "hot" and "cold" in his dormitory bathroom. "There were two cocks that you turned and water came out: cold and hot. He felt cold and then a little hot: and he could see the names printed on the cocks. That was a very queer thing."[30] Stephen feels alternately hot and cold as he eyes or reads each respective spout, and he marvels at the fact that words evoke in him physiological reactions corresponding to their meanings. He also refers several times to the "little song" of the gas that, it seems, is a kind of warm background buzz: "when the fellows stopped talking in the playroom," he says, "you could hear it."[31] The point is that he learns these lessons about representation, about the power of words, writing, and sound, from connecting them first with the power of utilities. It is the word *hot* that makes him feel hot, for example, not the water—nothing sensate, only the power of language. And it is not language as mere meaning, or as rational communication, so to speak, that charms Stephen; it is, as the gas jet suggests, language as song. If we can see Stephen's experience with the water cocks as a kind of childish mistake—a pre-Saussurian identity of signifier and signified, the same mistake he makes later with the word

God[32]—we are also obliged to see that experience as the beginning of a philosophical inquiry into the nature of language. With the song of the gas jet, Stephen perceives his first inkling of his future vocation: language-as-art. Marie-Sophie's story of literacy betrays the same connection between the public utility and the writing life; in Stephen's "song" of the gas jet, we ought to hear Marie-Sophie's electrical description of reading, "one hum, crackling under [her] fingers."

As a young man having decided to dedicate all his energies to writing-as-art, Stephen repudiates his early interest in public utilities. The final chapter of *Portrait* sees Stephen in a college lecture about electricity, to which he pays little attention, preferring instead to banter with his classmates. Intellectual curiosity for the science behind the public utility is dead for the young artist, but Joyce himself, writing at a critical distance from his ironized earlier self, is careful to show us that this is a mistake on Stephen's part. This is in essence the purpose of including the lecture on electricity; just as Marie-Sophie misses the significance of her earlier confrontation with electrical engineering in her first book, so Stephen misses his later confrontation with it in his classes.

Through the young Stephen Dedalus we can see that Marie-Sophie's predicament, her ignorance of the narrative dynamo that drives her to plug Texaco into the grid, has a kind of precedent in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In the ambivalence of both Stephen and Marie-Sophie toward electricity is a genealogy of a trope of the bildungsroman or, in both these cases, the *Künstlerroman* (artist-novel). For the artist conceived within the confines of this generic tradition, there is no room for public utilities, engineering, or infrastructure. This may even be true not only for our protagonists, but for literary critics as well. Robbins offers, again in "The Smell of Infrastructure," a provisional story for why this should be the case.

> The modern study of literature, much like Romantic literature itself, was arguably born from nineteenth-century resistance to the criterion of utility . . . the concept of culture emerges in reaction against the proindustrial ideology of utilitarianism . . . if the humanities in the era of cultural studies took up Foucault instead of Arnold as our inspiration, and did so without missing a beat, this is in large part because of a constitutive disgust for Bentham and utilitarianism, lodged deep in the interdisciplinary unconscious, a disgust that prepared us to recognize ourselves in Foucault's gesture of singling out Bentham's Panopticon to stand for what is most wrong with the modern world, or at least for what we are here on earth to make right.[33]

This could be the literary and literary-critical legacy[34] that makes Marie-Sophie ignore her electricity primer and that makes Stephen mock the electricity lecture as terminally dull: "The droning voice of the professor

continued to wind itself slowly round and round the coils it spoke of, doubling, trebling, quadrupling its somnolent energy as the coil multiplied its ohms of resistance."[35] What an utterly counterintuitive metaphor this is, in defiance of every timeworn cliché of how to use the metaphor of electricity in a sentence: as a shock, as hyperawareness, as invention and discovery and inspiration. Though the metaphor is entirely accurate in its employment of the terms "ohm" and "resistance," I still can't quite decide if this is a brilliant overturning of cliché or an awkward stab at convention.[36] At the least, I imagine it might be one of the very few metaphors of its kind, though Marie-Sophie comes close enough in her description of the primer. Electricity might be generally a figuration for excitement, but when used as a figure for itself, it appears to short out into its opposite: boredom, dullness. The awful incongruity of Stephen's figuration, though, is symptomatic of the truth of Robbins's claim. Artists and critics are disgusted by utility, steeped in a tradition stretching back to the Romantics. In its unthought power, that tradition works practically to force Stephen to be uninterested in the lecture and Marie-Sophie to be uninterested in her primer. By 1904, when the last chapter of *Portrait* takes place, electric street lighting was just beginning to replace gaslight on the streets of Dublin,[37] so the lecture on electricity is not merely academic; electricity was really happening in the streets, so to speak, in the process of establishing itself as the ubiquitous public utility that it would very quickly become.

There are some interesting counterexamples to the reflexive dismissal of the public utility in the bildungsroman, but they tend, symptomatically, to the other extreme: fetishism. Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man* is a stunning example.[38] There the invisible man begins writing his story at the same time that he begins his "battle" with the electric company, Monopolated Light and Power, from his basement squat in a Harlem tenement. This battle he wages by stealing as much electricity as possible, collecting several gramophones and upward of a thousand lightbulbs, running them all simultaneously to siphon off electricity from the corporate giant and to provide himself with a synæsthetic buzz. "I love light," he reports, "that is why I fight my battle with Monopolated Light and Power. The deeper reason, I mean; it allows me to feel my vital aliveness."[39] Vital aliveness, somnolent energy, the crackle of souls; we seem to arrive at the same conclusion via very different orientations toward both writing and the public utility. In another example, Henry Roth's 1934 *Call It Sleep,* the child-protagonist at the beginning of the novel stares in wonder at the kitchen sink.[40] At the end, David jams a metal dipper into the third rail of a Lower East Side elevated train track, causing a power outage and very nearly electrocuting himself, risking death in order to touch the power embodied in the public utility. Bruce Robbins, in an article published

twenty-five years before "The Smell of Infrastructure," called David's obsession a "cult of the public utilities."[41] I would stick to fetishism because it describes much better the counterpathology that Robbins identifies later, that institutionalized hatred for the public utility from the vantage point of culture, especially literary culture.

Outside of literary culture, electricity has a tendency—especially in situations where it is not in constant supply—to figure recognition, just as it does in *Texaco.* In his 2003 film *Power Trip*, a documentary telling the story of the denationalization and consequent privatization of electricity in post-Soviet Tiblisi, the capital city of Georgia, Paul Devlin interviews a local resident on the question of what electricity means, and his answer echoes Marie-Sophie's: "If you don't have power, it means that you are hungry. And you are cold. And you are in the dark. No information. This is like . . . being dead, you know?"[42] His "being dead," to her "we still didn't exist"—can we not hear in both of these statements a way of equating being supplied with electricity with being recognized as citizens, as the difference between social life and social death? In 2004 in another Georgian city, Kutaisi, protestors motivated by rolling blackouts took to the streets shouting "Give us light!" And in response, the deputy governor, Gia Tevdoradze, uncomprehendingly blurted before the crowd, in a near-perfect echo of Texaco's residents: "You haven't had electricity for thirteen years [so] why do you remember it?"[43] Marie-Sophie: "We began to feel the need for certainties and for conveniences which, strangely enough, we would sorely miss all the sudden."[44] A paradox: How is it possible to miss what one never had in the first place?

Marie-Sophie groups electricity with "certainties" and "conveniences." Unlike access to clean water, electricity is not a human necessity. It nevertheless emerges from these fictions as a nonnegotiable demand made by citizens on the state. Kutaisi's protesters announce the demand for positive rights, not "the right not to be killed" or "the right not to be tortured"[45] but "the right to light": the right to be seen, to be recognized, to be supplied. A right of consumption, modeled perhaps on the excesses of the west, but enacted in an entirely different context, an entirely different relationship to power. And indeed, the point is not argued; it is asserted without, and in some sense beyond, argumentation, as beyond or before argument. The demand is staged as an ambiguous but emphatic "before": "remembering" electricity from before, missing "certainties and conveniences" from before that cannot logically have come from before. This is, among other things, the very grammatical structure of human rights, which, as Slaughter points out in his essay, can only be enacted by declaring their anteriority to the moment of their declaration.[46] Electricity is assumed by these protestors, and by Marie-Sophie and the residents of Texaco, to be a right: a right to recognition beyond necessity, which is, arguably, the

very moment where human recognition really begins. There is a clear if somewhat canned connection between light and enlightenment, a trope so old that neither Stephen nor Marie-Sophie can really credit it, as if its lack of originality (something that the upstart artist of the bildungsroman tends by convention to overvalue) were by extension the proof of its bankruptcy. Their narrators do credit it, however: and so, I think, should we, in the face of our old institutional prejudices.

There's an important difference, then, between taking up water as an exemplary public utility and taking up electricity in the same way. Both Robbins and Yeager spend a great deal of time in their essays on the toilet, on sanitation. But to dwell on the scat of the sewer is to miss the way in which the call for electricity—from Marie-Sophie and Texaco and Georgia's residents—is not a call for necessity or survival but for something else altogether. Electricity stands at a very difficult conceptual position: on the one hand a kind of luxury good provided by the state, on the other a powerful metaphorical and real weapon of state power. Torture by means of electrocution, for example: the invisible man develops his fetish out of ambivalent experience, from torture on an electrified carpet to electroshock therapy. The death penalty in the United States has its history tied into the history of the national electrical grid.[47] Electricity, it seems, figures what we might want from the state at the same time that it figures what we know we don't.

"From breast to breast th'electric ardour ran / And in full glare display'd the rights of man."
—St. John Honeywood, as quoted in James Delbourgo,
A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders

On 27 October 2005, two French teenagers, Zyed Banna and Bouna Traore, aged seventeen and fifteen, were electrocuted in a freak accident in Clichy-sous-Bois, a *banlieue* of Paris. These *banlieues* are the slums of Paris, populated by poor immigrants, and referred to in general in slang as *la sous-France*, meaning something like "the France downstairs," but playing as well on *la souffrance*, suffering. The boys jumped into a pit of high-voltage cabling at the back of an electrical substation and were burnt alive. Shortly before, they were accosted by police demanding ID papers while they were playing soccer with a third boy, Muttin Altun, who miraculously survived. It is assumed that the police chased them, though it's not clear why they ran into the substation where they met their end. But this is no longer subject to verification. The police never reported chasing them. The prime minister denied that the police chased them. The lights in Clichy-sous-Bois went out momentarily when the

electrical surge tripped the local grid. "In the darkness, rumors grew fast"; locals thought that the police had killed the boys.[48] It is not clear what kind of mistake, if mistake is even the right word, this conclusion is. The riots that ensued lasted for two weeks and spread to several other parts of France and Belgium. There was a genuine moment—for the authorities, a terrified moment—in which something seemed unleashed that could no longer be controlled. Crucially, the riots were not, as was popularly believed, motivated or controlled by Islamic fundamentalists, and their violence was not, as a rule, directed toward people. Property (usually cars) was destroyed, but people were largely spared.[49]

I don't imagine that the riots were motivated by the boys' deaths. Outrages like this happen quite often without sparking such social upheaval. Doubtless a concatenation of events, historical cruxes, and circumstances came together at that moment to cause that outcome, which was in any case a long time coming. But a series of correspondences also present themselves. The boys found themselves confronting state power in its extreme polarities: the repressive apparatus and the public utility. The chase itself is a kind of prosaic and tragic instance of the urban spectacle of *parkour*, the boys as *traceurs* caught between the two functions of the state, trying to dodge them and, as a consequence, tracing them: mapping them. A kind of real-life expression of Leïto's demand for infrastructure, David's childish attempt to access power through electrical current, the invisible man's electrical obsession born of torture and entitlement: the symbolic charges of this narrative might, I think, have had something to do with the popular reaction. This might be a spurious kind of connection, but we have to remember that for Marie-Sophie as well, the connection between the electricity primer and her later work is merely incidental; it only becomes important as a narrative structure, important, that is, for her but never to her. Who is to say that any other kind of event, other than this narrative obstacle course through the vicissitudes of power, could have sparked what followed, could have presented the crowd with the motivation and the momentary awareness of its own power, its own visibility, its own interrelatedness that the specific nature of such accidental death afforded?[50] The event was, in any case, an occasion, not a cause—a highly charged occasion, a moving metaphor, a figure, a trope. And this hidden trigger, much more than, say, looting, is what differentiates a riot—in this case what Loïc Wacquant calls a "protopolitical event"—from an organized protest.[51] What an answer to the state that was chasing them down, what an incredible turning of the tables; after the news broke about the incident, the police were helpless, and on 8 November the state declared a national emergency, publicly doubting its ability to quell the riots. The people—the invisibles, the immigrants, the unemployed, the global residuum—were plugged in, and lit up. Of course, that is just a metaphor. But it is possible,

following its fictional precedents, and for whatever it may be worth, that it is just the right one.

Notes

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1. *District B13*, screenplay by Luc Besson and Bibi Naceri, directed by Pierre Morel, produced by *TF1* and *Canal+*, 2004. Thanks to Joshua Clover for reminding me about this scene.

2. The nature of the French *services publics* differs significantly from the British civil service and the American public utility. For more on the deep cultural sense of the institution in France, see Jacques Fournier's description of "public services" on the Embassy of France in the United States Web site, www.ambafrance-us.org/atoz/public_services.asp.

3. Patricia Yeager, "Introduction: Dreaming of Infrastructure," *PMLA* 122 (2007): 9–26.

4. Yeager is talking about something like wishing for infrastructure. Though I don't have time to address the issue directly here, I think it important to note that, from the perspective of those who do have infrastructure, the "dream" of destroying it is often as powerful or more so than the dream of building it or having it. Hollywood action cinema is the most obvious example. But this is to get into a psychoanalytic argument that would take us too far away from the generic and historical points that I'll be making here.

5. Yeager, "Dreaming of Infrastructure," 15.

6. Belle and Foucan parted ways in 1998, with Belle claiming to practice a kind of spiritual form of *parkour* and Foucan calling his version "free running." Belle has accused "free running" of being too sensational and commercial. Foucan has sold his image to K-Swiss to market a "free running" shoe. So it goes. If nothing else, this all signals the way in which *parkour* looks like the "next big thing" in the commercial appropriation of urban street culture, and the way in which such appropriation, through French-to-English translation, strips the form of its historical origins. In this sense "free running" is a wishful translation of *parkour*, whose name has roots in French imperialist adventures in Vietnam and Africa, where the French military developed their physical fitness programs.

7. *Casino Royale*, directed by Martin Campbell, Columbia Pictures, 2006.

8. Yeager, "Dreaming of Infrastructure," 10.

9. See Klein's *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan, 2007) and the excerpt from the book, "Disaster Capitalism: The New Economy of Catastrophe," *Harper's Magazine*, October 2007, 47–58.

10. Mike Davis, "Planet of Slums," *New Left Review* 26 (2004): 5–34.

11. Bruce Robbins, "The Smell of Infrastructure," *boundary 2* 34 (2007): 25–33.

12. Thanks to Chris Otter for inventing this term and allowing me to borrow it from his forthcoming work.

13. Ashley Dawson and Brent Hayes Edwards, eds., "Global Cities of the South," special issue, *Social Text*, no. 81 (2004).

14. Patrick Chamoiseau, *Texaco* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992). English translation by Rose-Myriam Réjouis and Val Vinokurov (New York: Vintage, 1998). All following citations are from the Vintage English translation unless noted otherwise.

15. Davis, "Planet of Slums," 7.

16. Ashley Dawson, "Squatters, Space, and Belonging in the Underdeveloped City," *Social Text*, no. 81 (2004): 18.

17. Ibid., 19.

18. Chamoiseau, *Texaco*, 381, my emphasis.

19. I quote the French text from Chamoiseau, *Texaco*, 486. The French is more explicit about what the "blemish" in "unblemished joy" might be: *faille* means variously a break, a fault, a rift, default, or even bankruptcy. *Une joie sans faille* is less common, in standard French, than the more standard *une joie sans tare*, a joy without stain. The English translation "blemish" probably follows this more current usage. *Une joie sans faille* is an older usage in standard French that remains current in Creole French. Thanks to Katherine Anderson for pointing this out to me.

20. The phrase is Robert Kurz's, as quoted in Roberto Schwartz's review of the film *City of God* in *New Left Review* 12 (2001): 112.

21. Chamoiseau, *Texaco*, 216.

22. Ibid., 218.

23. Ibid., 366–67.

24. Quoted in Chamoiseau, *Texaco*, 368.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid., 369.

27. Joseph Slaughter, "Enabling Fictions: The *Bildungsroman* and International Human Rights Law," *PMLA* 121 (2006): 1415.

28. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Penguin, 1993).

29. Joyce's writing is a frequent point of reference for Marie-Sophie herself. She speaks of reading Joyce as a way of accompanying him "in Dublin's City where the infinite was being envisioned" (Chamoiseau, *Texaco*, 366). The similarity of Dublin as a colonial slum at the turn of the twentieth century and Fort-de-France as a postcolonial slum at the turn of the twenty-first is pointed out in Mike Davis's book version of *Planet of Slums*: "Most cities of the South, however, more closely resemble Victorian Dublin, which, as historian Emmet Larkin has stressed, was unique amongst all the slumdoms produced in the western world in the nineteenth century . . . [because] its slums were not a product of the industrial revolution.'" Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (New York: Verso, 2006), 16. Thus what Marie-Sophie perceives as a literary affinity is also a function of Texaco's location, and Dublin's location, in the world economic system, though at opposite ends of the century.

30. Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist*, 8.

31. Ibid., 11.

32. "Though there were different names for God in all the different languages in the world and God understood what all the people who prayed said in their different languages still God remained always the same God and God's real name was God" (ibid., 23).

33. Robbins, "Smell of Infrastructure," 27.

34. I'm following through on Robbins's notion of literary distaste for utility here, but it is important to note that Joseph Slaughter makes a kind of counterargu-

ment in his "Enabling Fictions." There he makes the case that the bildungsroman was and is an underappreciated model not only for the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights but also for the 1986 Declaration of the Right to Development, a claim that would superficially seem to contradict Robbins. Rather than see it as a contradiction, however, I would mark the moment as a crucial intersection for further conversation and debate.

35. Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist*, 210.

36. It might be worth pointing out that "somnolent energy," insofar as it could be construed as a dream state, would later become, for Joyce in *Finnegans Wake*, anything but boring, signifying instead the sublime vastness of the unconscious, the tremendous energies untapped and inaccessible in a waking state.

37. See S. J. Connelly, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Irish History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 169. See also Joyce's *The Dead*, where the transition between gas street-lighting and electric street-lighting is employed as a trope allegorizing the tension between the traditional west and the Anglicized east of Ireland.

38. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1995).

39. Ibid., 6–7.

40. Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1991).

41. Bruce Robbins, "Modernism in History, Modernism in Power," in *Modernism Reconsidered*, ed. Robert Kiely (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 245.

42. *Power Trip*, directed by Paul Devlin, 2003.

43. Molly Corso, "Promises Still Power Georgia's Electricity System," 24 January 2005, www.Eurasianet.org.

44. Chamoiseau, *Texaco*, 365.

45. See Jacques Rancière, "Who Is the Subject of the Rights of Man?" in "And Justice for All? The Claims of Human Rights," special issue, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103 (2004): 297–310. Rancière speaks of Arendt's suspicion that "the Rights of Man [were] a mere abstraction because the only real rights were the rights of citizens, the rights attached to a national community as such." Or again that human rights are "the rights of those who have no more property left than the property of being human . . . they are the rights of those who have no rights, the mere derision of right" (298).

46. See Slaughter, "Enabling Fictions," especially pages 1412–15. Those sections outline why human rights discourse must have recourse to tautological "legal conventions of the obvious" (1414). Thus "for example, the 1986 Declaration on the Right to Development formulates its developmental common sense as a perfect tautology. Its final preambular paragraph *confirms* 'that the right to development is an inalienable human right,' anticipating article 1, which now *proclaims*, 'The right to development is an inalienable human right.' . . . Each of the preambular statements of recognition and confirmation has a corresponding statement in the body of the text that articulates the same content (often verbatim) in the declarative mode. These two speech acts—the constative that confirms and the declarative that enacts—interact to imbue the hermetic legal tautologies with kinetic energy and a temporal dimension that initiates a sort of teleology in tautology" (1414; emphasis in original).

47. See Mark Essig, *Edison and the Electric Chair* (New York: Sutton, 2003). Edison lobbied for capital punishment by electrocution using Westinghouse's alternating current in the hope that associating alternating current with the threat of death would guarantee that the as-yet-unbuilt national electrical grid would adopt his own direct current supply method. In effect Edison wanted to create a differ-

ence in the popular imagination between state power as repressive apparatus (alternating current) and state power as public utility (direct current). His motivations were entrepreneurial, not philosophical, and he was ultimately unsuccessful because alternating current is far more efficient than direct current. But what's interesting is that he was able for a time to exploit an imaginative distinction, that is to say, a distinction that was more wished-for than real, between the state-as-executioner and the state-as-supplier of the public good.

48. Kevin Braddock, "Boulevard of Broken Dreams," *GQ* (UK), March 2006, 181.

49. See also Thomas Crampton, "Behind the Furor: The Last Moments of Two Youths," *New York Times*, 7 November 2005; Piotr Smolar, "Clichy revendique une colère 'sincère,' dix jours après la mort des deux adolescents" ("Clichy Expresses 'Sincere' Anger, Ten Days after the Deaths of Two Adolescents"), *Le Monde*, 7 November 2005; Henri Astier, "Ghettos Shackle French Muslims," BBC News, 31 October 2005, www.news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4375910.stm; John Simpson, "Violence Exposes France's Weaknesses," BBC News, 7 November 2005, www.news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4414442.stm; Christiane Amanpour, "De Villepin Interview: Full Text," CNN, 29 November 2005, www.cnn.com/2005/WORLD/europe/11/29/devillepin.text/index.html; Alain Morice, "Comprendre avant de juger: À propos des émeutes urbaines en France" ("Understanding before Judgment: On the Urban Riots in France"), *Samizdat*, 24 January 2006; Slavoj Žižek, "Some Politically Incorrect Reflections on Violence in France," *Multitudes*, 21 November 2005, www.multitudes.samizdat.net/article.php3?id_article=2142; see also the animated short film by Koulamata, *The French Democracy*, Lionhead Movies, www.machinima.com/film/view&id=1407.

50. My discussion here is meant as a counterargument to Jean Baudrillard, "The Pyres of Autumn," *New Left Review* 37 (2006): 5–7, where he makes the case for the riots as an absolute refusal of "inclusion" of any sort in the bankrupt institutions of the state. "In the wake of the November fires," he says, "mainstream political sociology spoke of integration, employment, security. I am not so sure the rioters want to be reintegrated on those lines" (7). It's of interest that Baudrillard's essay opens with irony: he compares the burning cars to "a sort of eternal flame, like that burning under the Arc de Triumphe, burning in honour of the unknown immigrant" (5). Unlike him, I see no reason that this may not be, quite unironically, the case. Baudrillard's contemptuous stance merely mirrors that of Marie-Sophie and Stephen as conventional *Bildungshelde*. On the contrary, I see in the riots claims made not only against the state but on the state. Burning cars are not anarchic expressions of pure destruction; they are part of a long succession and tradition of revolutionary action stretching back to "lantern smashing," which involved in its earlier incarnation the extinguishing of official streetlighting, and the later practice, after the advent of gaslight, of igniting the gas mains to produce explosive and intense light and keep the police busy. Victor Hugo in 1848 found poetic delight in the way that the masses were mobilizing public works in the service of protest and rebellion: "The pavement is the most splendid symbol of the people. One tramples on it until it dashes one's head to pieces." Or again: "the paving stones! The paving stones! Piled up in bulwarks, like soldiers, they halt attacks." *Parkour*, it seems to me, is an invention in line with this venerable tradition, as is car burning, with the crucial difference that in the twenty-first century it seems that the destruction of public property in the form of roadworks and gasworks has transformed itself, in the privatized present, into the destruction of private property in the form of the automobile and the preservation

and cultivation of public works and utilities. See Wolfgang Shivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), especially chap. 2, "The Street." Hugo is quoted on 107.

51. Wacquant sees in the riots "good news" in the sense that the *banlieues* were announcing a refusal both of their own social marginalization and an indictment of the blindness of the French political elite. There were some immediate political victories scored through the emergency, among them an additional 100 million euros dedicated to social programs, creating positions for 5,000 new "pedagogical assistants" and 100,000 new fellowships in the school system. In sum, the government seemed ready to rededicate itself to the institutional ideals of the *services publics*. See Loïc Wacquant and Tyler Stovall, "Burn Baby Burn, French Style: Roots of the Riots in Urban France" (lecture delivered at the University of California, Berkeley, 17 November 2005), Webcast at webcast.berkeley.edu/event_details.php?webcastid=14202.