

T H E

A R C A D E S P R O J E C T



W A L T E R B E N J A M I N



TRANSLATED BY HOWARD EILAND
AND KEVIN McLAUGHLIN

THE
ARCADES
PROJECT
WALTER BENJAMIN

Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin

PREPARED ON THE BASIS OF THE GERMAN VOLUME EDITED BY ROLF TIEDEMANN

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Translators' Foreword

The materials assembled in Volume 5 of Walter Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften*, under the title *Das Passagen-Werk* (first published in 1982), represent research that Benjamin carried out, over a period of thirteen years, on the subject of the Paris arcades—*les passages*—which he considered the most important architectural form of the nineteenth century, and which he linked with a number of phenomena characteristic of that century's major and minor preoccupations. A glance at the overview preceding the "Convolutives" at the center of the work reveals the range of these phenomena, which extend from the literary and philosophical to the political, economic, and technological, with all sorts of intermediate relations. Benjamin's intention from the first, it would seem, was to grasp such diverse material under the general category of *Urgeschichte*, signifying the "primal history" of the nineteenth century. This was something that could be realized only indirectly, through "cunning": it was not the great men and celebrated events of traditional historiography but rather the "refuse" and "detritus" of history, the half-concealed, variegated traces of the daily life of "the collective," that was to be the object of study, and with the aid of methods more akin—above all, in their dependence on chance—to the methods of the nineteenth-century collector of antiquities and curiosities, or indeed to the methods of the nineteenth-century ragpicker, than to those of the modern historian. Not conceptual analysis but something like dream interpretation was the model. The nineteenth century was the collective dream which we, its heirs, were obliged to reenter, as patiently and minutely as possible, in order to follow out its ramifications and, finally, awaken from it. This, at any rate, was how it looked at the outset of the project, which wore a good many faces over time.

Begun in 1927 as a planned collaboration for a newspaper article on the arcades, the project had quickly burgeoned under the influence of Surrealism, a movement toward which Benjamin always maintained a pronounced ambivalence. Before long, it was an essay he had in mind, "Pariser Passagen: Eine dialektische Feerie" (Paris Arcades: A Dialectical Fairyland), and then, a few years later, a book, *Paris, die Hauptstadt des XIX. Jahrhunderts* (Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century). For some two-and-a-half years, at the end of the Twenties, having expressed his sense of alienation from contemporary German writers and his affinity with the French cultural milieu, Benjamin worked intermittently on reams of notes and sketches, producing one short essay, "Der

Saturnring oder Etwas vom Eisenbau" (The Ring of Saturn, or Some Remarks on Iron Construction), which is included here in the section "Early Drafts." A hiatus of about four years ensued, until, in 1934, Benjamin resumed work on the arcades with an eye to "new and far-reaching sociological perspectives." The scope of the undertaking, the volume of materials collected, was assuming epic proportions, and no less epic was the manifest interminability of the task, which Benjamin pursued in his usual fearless way—step by step, risking engulfment—beneath the ornamented vaulting of the reading room of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Already in a letter of 1930, he refers to *The Arcades Project* as "the theater of all my struggles and all my ideas."

In 1935, at the request of his colleagues at the Institute of Social Research in New York, Benjamin drew up an exposé, or documentary synopsis, of the main lines of *The Arcades Project*; another exposé, based largely on the first but more exclusively theoretical, was written in French, in 1939, in an attempt to interest an American sponsor. Aside from these remarkably concentrated essays, and the brief text "The Ring of Saturn," the entire *Arcades* complex (without definitive title, to be sure) remained in the form of several hundred notes and reflections of varying length, which Benjamin revised and grouped in sheafs, or "convolutes," according to a host of topics. Additionally, from the late Twenties on, it would appear, citations were incorporated into these materials—passages drawn mainly from an array of nineteenth-century sources, but also from the works of key contemporaries (Marcel Proust, Paul Valéry, Louis Aragon, André Breton, Georg Simmel, Ernst Bloch, Siegfried Kracauer, Theodor Adorno). These proliferating individual passages, extracted from their original context like collectibles, were eventually set up to communicate among themselves, often in a rather subterranean manner. The organized masses of historical objects—the particular items of Benjamin's display (drafts and excerpts)—together give rise to "a world of secret affinities," and each separate article in the collection, each entry, was to constitute a "magic encyclopedia" of the epoch from which it derived. An *image* of that epoch. In the background of this theory of the historical image, constituent of a historical "mirror world," stands the idea of the monad—an idea given its most comprehensive formulation in the pages on origin in the prologue to Benjamin's book on German tragic drama, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (Origin of the German Trauerspiel)—and back of this the doctrine of the reflective medium, in its significance for the object, as expounded in Benjamin's 1919 dissertation, "Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik" (The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism). At bottom, a canon of (nonsensuous) similitude rules the conception of the *Arcades*.

Was this conception realized? In the text we have before us, is the world of secret affinities in any sense perceptible? Can one even speak of a "world" in the case of a literary fragment? For, since the publication of the *Passagen-Werk*, it has become customary to regard the text which Benjamin himself usually called the *Passagenarbeit*, or just the *Passagen*, as at best a "torso," a monumental fragment or ruin, and at worst a mere notebook, which the author supposedly intended to mine for more extended discursive applications (such as the carefully outlined and possibly half-completed book on Baudelaire, which he worked on from 1937 to 1939). Certainly, the project as a whole is unfinished; Benjamin abandoned

work on it in the spring of 1940, when he was forced to flee Paris before the advancing German army. Did he leave behind anything more than a large-scale plan or prospectus? No, it is argued, *The Arcades Project* is just that: the blueprint for an unimaginably massive and labyrinthine architecture—a dream city, in effect. This argument is predicated on the classic distinction between research and application, *Forschung* and *Darstellung* (see, for example, entry N4a,5 in the “Convolutes”), a distinction which Benjamin himself invokes at times, as in a letter to Gershom Scholem of March 3, 1934, where he wonders about ways in which his research on the arcades might be put to use, or in a letter of May 3, 1936, where he tells Scholem that not a syllable of the actual text (*eigentlichen Text*) of the *Passagenarbeit* exists yet. In another of his letters to Scholem of this period, he speaks of the future construction of a literary form for this text. Similar statements appear in letters to Adorno and others. Where *The Arcades Project* is concerned, then, we may distinguish between various stages of research, more or less advanced, but there is no question of a realized work. So runs the lament.

Nevertheless, questions remain, not least as a consequence of the radical status of “study” in Benjamin’s thinking (see the Kafka essay of 1934, or Convolute m of the *Arcades*, “Idleness”). For one thing, as we have indicated, many of the passages of reflection in the “Convolutes” section represent revisions of earlier drafts, notes, or letters. Why revise for a notebook? The fact that Benjamin also transferred masses of quotations from actual notebooks to the manuscript of the convolutes, and the elaborate organization of these cited materials in that manuscript (including the use of numerous epigraphs), might likewise bespeak a compositional principle at work in the project, and not just an advanced stage of research. In fact, the montage form—with its philosophic play of distances, transitions, and intersections, its perpetually shifting contexts and ironic juxtapositions—had become a favorite device in Benjamin’s later investigations; among his major works, we have examples of this in *Einbahnstrasse* (One-Way Street), *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert* (A Berlin Childhood around 1900), “Über den Begriff der Geschichte” (On the Concept of History), and “Zentralpark” (Central Park). What is distinctive about *The Arcades Project*—in Benjamin’s mind, it always dwelt apart—is the working of quotations into the framework of montage, so much so that they eventually far outnumber the commentaries. If we now were to regard this ostensible patchwork as, de facto, a determinate literary form, one that has effectively constructed itself (that is, fragmented itself), like the *Journaux intimes* of Baudelaire, then surely there would be significant repercussions for the direction and tempo of its reading, to say the least. The transcendence of the conventional book form would go together, in this case, with the blasting apart of pragmatic historicism—grounded, as this always is, on the premise of a continuous and homogeneous temporality. Citation and commentary might then be perceived as intersecting at a thousand different angles, setting up vibrations across the epochs of recent history, so as to effect “the cracking open of natural teleology.” And all this would unfold through the medium of hints or “blinks”—a discontinuous presentation deliberately opposed to traditional modes of argument. At any rate, it seems undeniable that despite the informal, epistolary announcements of a “book” in the works, an *eigentlichen Buch*, the research project had become an end in itself.

Of course, many readers will concur with the German editor of the *Passagen-Werk*, Rolf Tiedemann, when he speaks, in his essay "Dialectics at a Standstill" (first published as the introduction to the German edition, and reproduced here in translation), of the "oppressive chunks of quotations" filling its pages. Part of Benjamin's purpose was to document as concretely as possible, and thus lend a "heightened graphicness" to, the scene of revolutionary change that was the nineteenth century. At issue was what he called the "commodification of things." He was interested in the unsettling effects of incipient high capitalism on the most intimate areas of life and work—especially as reflected in the work of art (its composition, its dissemination, its reception). In this "projection of the historical into the intimate," it was a matter not of demonstrating any straightforward cultural "decline," but rather of bringing to light an uncanny sense of crisis *and* of security, of crisis *in* security. Particularly from the perspective of the nineteenth-century domestic interior, which Benjamin likens to the inside of a mollusk's shell, things were coming to seem more entirely material than ever and, at the same time, more spectral and estranged. In the society at large (and in Baudelaire's writing par excellence), an unflinching realism was cultivated alongside a rhapsodic idealism. This essentially ambiguous situation—one could call it, using the term favored by a number of the writers studied in *The Arcades Project*, "phantasmagorical"—sets the tone for Benjamin's deployment of motifs, for his recurrent topographies, his mobile cast of characters, his gallery of types. For example, these nineteenth-century types (flâneur, collector, and gambler head the list) generally constitute figures in the middle—that is, figures residing within as well as outside the marketplace, between the worlds of money and magic—figures on the threshold. Here, furthermore, in the wakening to crisis (crisis masked by habitual complacency), was the link to present-day concerns. Not the least cunning aspect of this historical awakening—which is, at the same time, an awakening to myth—was the critical role assigned to humor, sometimes humor of an infernal kind. This was one way in which the documentary and the artistic, the sociological and the theological, were to meet head-on.

To speak of awakening was to speak of the "afterlife of works," something brought to pass through the medium of the "dialectical image." The latter is Benjamin's central term, in *The Arcades Project*, for the historical object of interpretation: that which, under the divinatory gaze of the collector, is taken up into the collector's own particular time and place, thereby throwing a pointed light on what has been. Welcomed into a present moment that seems to be waiting just for it—"actualized," as Benjamin likes to say—the moment from the past comes alive as never before. In this way, the "now" is itself experienced as preformed in the "then," as its distillation—thus the leading motif of "precursors" in the text. The historical object is reborn as such into a present day capable of receiving it, of suddenly "recognizing" it. This is the famous "now of recognizability" (*Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit*), which has the character of a lightning flash. In the dusty, cluttered corridors of the arcades, where street and interior are one, historical time is broken up into kaleidoscopic distractions and momentary come-ons, myriad displays of ephemera, thresholds for the passage of what Gérard de Nerval (in *Aurélia*) calls "the ghosts of material things." Here, at a distance from what is normally meant by "progress," is the *ur*-historical, collective redemption of lost time, of the times embedded in the spaces of things.

The German edition of the *Passagen-Werk* contains—besides the two exposés we have mentioned, the long series of convolutes that follow, the “Erste Notizen” (here translated as “First Sketches”) and “Frühe Entwürfe” (“Early Drafts”) at the end—a wealth of supplementary material relating to the genesis of *The Arcades Project*. From this textual-critical apparatus, drawn on for the Translators’ Notes, we have extracted three additional sets of preliminary drafts and notations and translated them in the Addenda; we have also reproduced the introduction by the German editor, Rolf Tiedemann, as well as an account of Benjamin’s last days written by Lisa Fitko and printed in the original English at the end of the German edition. Omitted from our volume are some 100 pages of excerpts from letters to and from Benjamin, documenting the growth of the project (the majority of these letters appear elsewhere in English); a partial bibliography, compiled by Tiedemann, of 850 works cited in the “Convolutes”; and, finally, precise descriptions of Benjamin’s manuscripts and manuscript variants (see translators’ initial note to the “Convolutes”). In an effort to respect the unique constitution of these manuscripts, we have adopted Tiedemann’s practice of using angle brackets to indicate editorial insertions into the text.

A salient feature of the German edition of Benjamin’s “Convolutes” (“Aufzeichnungen und Materialien”) is the use of two different typefaces: a larger one for his reflections in German and a smaller one for his numerous citations in French and German. According to Tiedemann’s introduction, the larger type was used for entries containing significant commentary by Benjamin. (In “First Sketches,” the two different typefaces are used to demarcate canceled passages.) This typographic distinction, designed no doubt for the convenience of readers, although it is without textual basis in Benjamin’s manuscript, has been maintained in the English translation. We have chosen, however, to use typefaces differing in style rather than in size, so as to avoid the hierarchical implication of the German edition (the privileging of Benjamin’s reflections over his citations, and, in general, of German over French). What Benjamin seems to have conceived was a dialectical relation—a formal and thematic interfusion of citation and commentary. It is an open, societary relation, as in the protocol to the imaginary world inn (itself an unacknowledged citation from Baudelaire’s *Paradis artificiels*) mentioned in the “Convolutes” at J75,2.

As for the bilingual character of the text as a whole, this has been, if not entirely eliminated in the English-language edition, then necessarily reduced to merely the citation of the original titles of Benjamin’s sources. (Previously published translations of these sources have been used, and duly noted, wherever possible; where two or more published translations of a passage are available, we have tried to choose the one best suited to Benjamin’s context.) In most cases we have regularized the citation of year and place of book publication, as well as volume and issue number of periodicals; bits of information, such as first names, have occasionally been supplied in angle brackets. Otherwise, Benjamin’s irregular if relatively scrupulous editorial practices have been preserved.

As a further aid to readers, the English-language edition of *The Arcades Project* includes an extensive if not exhaustive “Guide to Names and Terms”; translators’ notes intended to help contextualize Benjamin’s citations and reflections; and cross-references serving to link particular items in the “First Sketches” and “Early Drafts” to corresponding entries in the “Convolutes.”

Translation duties for this edition were divided as follows: Kevin McLaughlin translated the Exposé of 1939 and the previously untranslated French passages in Convolutes A–C, F, H, K, M (second half), O, Q–l, and p–r. Howard Eiland translated Benjamin's German throughout and was responsible for previously untranslated material in Convolutes D, E, G, I, J, L, M (first half), N, P, and m, as well as for the Translators' Foreword.

In conclusion, a word about the translation of *Konvolut*. As used for the grouping of the thirty-six alphabetized sections of the *Passagen* manuscript, this term, it would seem, derives not from Benjamin himself but from his friend Adorno (this according to a communication from Rolf Tiedemann, who studied with Adorno). It was Adorno who first sifted through the manuscript of the "Aufzeichnungen und Materialien," as Tiedemann later called it, after it had been hidden away by Georges Bataille in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France during the Second World War and then retrieved and delivered to New York at the end of 1947. In Germany, the term *Konvolut* has a common philological application: it refers to a larger or smaller assemblage—literally, a bundle—of manuscripts or printed materials that belong together. The noun "convolute" in English means "something of a convoluted form." We have chosen it as the translation of the German term over a number of other possibilities, the most prominent being "folder," "file," and "sheaf." The problem with these more common English terms is that each carries inappropriate connotations, whether of office supplies, computerese, agriculture, or archery. "Convolute" is strange, at least on first acquaintance, but so is Benjamin's project and its principle of sectioning. Aside from its desirable closeness to the German rubric, which, we have suggested, is both philologically and historically legitimated, it remains the most precise and most evocative term for designating the elaborately intertwined collections of "notes and materials" that make up the central division of this most various and colorful of Benjaminian texts.

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CONTENTS

Translators' Foreword	ix
Exposés	1
"Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century" (1935)	3
"Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" (1939)	14
Convolutés	27
Overview	29
First Sketches	827
Early Drafts	
"Arcades"	871
"The Arcades of Paris"	873
"The Ring of Saturn"	885
Addenda	
Exposé of 1935, Early Version	893
Materials for the Exposé of 1935	899
Materials for "Arcades"	919
"Dialectics at a Standstill," by Rolf Tiedemann	929
"The Story of Old Benjamin," by Lisa Fittko	946
Translators' Notes	955
Guide to Names and Terms	1016
Index	1055

Illustrations

Shops in the Passage Véro-Dodat	34
Glass roof and iron girders, Passage Vivienne	35
The Passage des Panoramas	36
A branch of La Belle Jardinière in Marseilles	47
The Passage de l'Opéra, 1822-1823	49
Street scene in front of the Passage des Panoramas	50
Au Bon Marché department store in Paris	59
<i>Le Pont des planètes</i> , by Grandville	65
Fashionable courtesans wearing crinolines, by Honoré Daumier	67
Tools used by Haussmann's workers	134
Interior of the Crystal Palace, London	159
<i>La Casse-tête-omanie, ou La Fureur du jour</i>	164
The Paris Stock Exchange, mid-nineteenth century	165
The Palais de l'Industrie at the world exhibition of 1855	166
<i>Le Triomphe du kaléidoscope, ou Le tombeau du jeu chinois</i>	169
Exterior of the Crystal Palace, London	185
Charles Baudelaire, by Nadar	229
The Pont-Neuf, by Charles Meryon	232
Théophile Gautier, by Nadar	242
The sewers of Paris, by Nadar	413
A Paris omnibus, by Honoré Daumier	433

A page of Benjamin's manuscript from Convolute N	457
A gallery of the Palais-Royal	491
A panorama under construction	529
A diorama on the Rue de Bondy	534
Self-portrait by Nadar	680
Nadar in his balloon, by Honoré Daumier	682
<i>The Origin of Painting</i>	683
<i>Rue Transnonain, le 15 avril 1834</i> , by Honoré Daumier	717
Honoré Daumier, by Nadar	742
Victor Hugo, by Etienne Carjat	747
<i>L'Artiste et l'amateur du dix-neuvième siècle</i>	750
<i>L'Homme de l'art dans l'embarras de son métier</i>	751
Alexandre Dumas père, by Nadar	752
<i>L'Etrangomanie blâmée, ou D'Etre Français il n'y a pas d'affront</i>	783
<i>Actualité</i> , a caricature of the painter Gustave Courbet	792
A barricade of the Paris Commune	794
The Fourierist missionary Jean Journet, by Nadar	813
Walter Benjamin consulting the <i>Grand Dictionnaire universel</i>	888
Walter Benjamin at the card catalogue of the Bibliothèque Nationale	889
The Passage Choiseul	927



EXPOSÉS

Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century

〈Exposé of 1935〉

The waters are blue, the plants pink; the evening is sweet to
look on;
One goes for a walk; the *grandes dames* go for a walk; behind
them stroll the *petites dames*.

—Nguyen Trong Hiep, *Paris, capitale de la France: Recueil de vers*
(Hanoi, 1897), poem 25

I. Fourier, or the Arcades

The magic columns of these palaces
Show to the amateur on all sides,
In the objects their porticos display,
That industry is the rival of the arts.

—*Nouveaux Tableaux de Paris* (Paris, 1828), vol. 1, p. 27

Most of the Paris arcades come into being in the decade and a half after 1822. The first condition for their emergence is the boom in the textile trade. *Magasins de nouveautés*, the first establishments to keep large stocks of merchandise on the premises, make their appearance.¹ They are the forerunners of department stores. This was the period of which Balzac wrote: “The great poem of display chants its stanzas of color from the Church of the Madeleine to the Porte Saint-Denis.”² The arcades are a center of commerce in luxury items. In fitting them out, art enters the service of the merchant. Contemporaries never tire of admiring them, and for a long time they remain a drawing point for foreigners. An *Illustrated Guide to Paris* says: “These arcades, a recent invention of industrial luxury, are glass-roofed, marble-paneled corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings, whose owners have joined together for such enterprises. Lining both sides of these corridors, which get their light from above, are the most elegant shops, so that the *passage* is a city, a world in miniature.” The arcades are the scene of the first gas lighting.

The second condition for the emergence of the arcades is the beginning of iron construction. The Empire saw in this technology a contribution to the revival of

architecture in the classical Greek sense. The architectural theorist Boetticher expresses the general view of the matter when he says that, “with regard to the art forms of the new system, the formal principle of the Hellenic mode” must come to prevail.³ Empire is the style of revolutionary terrorism, for which the state is an end in itself. Just as Napoleon failed to understand the functional nature of the state as an instrument of domination by the bourgeois class, so the architects of his time failed to understand the functional nature of iron, with which the constructive principle begins its domination of architecture. These architects design supports resembling Pompeian columns, and factories that imitate residential houses, just as later the first railroad stations will be modeled on chalets. “Construction plays the role of the subconscious.”⁴ Nevertheless, the concept of engineer, which dates from the revolutionary wars, starts to gain ground, and the rivalry begins between builder and decorator, Ecole Polytechnique and Ecole des Beaux-Arts.

For the first time in the history of architecture, an artificial building material appears: iron. It undergoes an evolution whose tempo will accelerate in the course of the century. This development enters a decisive new phase when it becomes clear that the locomotive—on which experiments have been conducted since the end of the 1820s—is compatible only with iron tracks. The rail becomes the first prefabricated iron component, the precursor of the girder. Iron is avoided in home construction but used in arcades, exhibition halls, train stations—buildings that serve transitory purposes. At the same time, the range of architectural applications for glass expands, although the social prerequisites for its widened application as building material will come to the fore only a hundred years later. In Scheerbart’s *Glasarchitektur* (1914), it still appears in the context of utopia.⁵

Each epoch dreams the one to follow.

—Michelet, “Avenir! Avenir!”⁶

Corresponding to the form of the new means of production, which in the beginning is still ruled by the form of the old (Marx), are images in the collective consciousness in which the new is permeated with the old. These images are wish images; in them the collective seeks both to overcome and to transfigure the immaturity of the social product and the inadequacies in the social organization of production. At the same time, what emerges in these wish images is the resolute effort to distance oneself from all that is antiquated—which includes, however, the recent past. These tendencies deflect the imagination (which is given impetus by the new) back upon the primal past. In the dream in which each epoch entertains images of its successor, the latter appears wedded to elements of primal history (*Urgeschichte*)—that is, to elements of a classless society. And the experiences of such a society—as stored in the unconscious of the collective—engender, through interpenetration with what is new, the utopia that has left its

trace in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions.

These relations are discernible in the utopia conceived by Fourier. Its secret cue is the advent of machines. But this fact is not directly expressed in the Fourierist literature, which takes, as its point of departure, the amorality of the business world and the false morality enlisted in its service. The phalanstery is designed to restore human beings to relationships in which morality becomes superfluous. The highly complicated organization of the phalanstery appears as machinery. The meshing of the passions, the intricate collaboration of *passions mécanistes* with the *passion cabaliste*, is a primitive contrivance formed—on analogy with the machine—from materials of psychology. This mechanism made of men produces the land of milk and honey, the primeval wish symbol that Fourier's utopia has filled with new life.

In the arcades, Fourier saw the architectural canon of the phalanstery. Their reactionary metamorphosis with him is characteristic: whereas they originally serve commercial ends, they become, for him, places of habitation. The phalanstery becomes a city of arcades. Fourier establishes, in the Empire's austere world of forms, the colorful idyll of Biedermeier. Its brilliance persists, however faded, up through Zola, who takes up Fourier's ideas in his book *Travail*, just as he bids farewell to the arcades in his *Thérèse Raquin*.—Marx came to the defense of Fourier in his critique of Carl Grün, emphasizing the former's "colossal conception of man." He also directed attention to Fourier's humor. In fact, Jean Paul, in his "Levana," is as closely allied to Fourier the pedagogue as Scheerbart, in his *Glass Architecture*, is to Fourier the utopian.⁸

II. Daguerre, or the Panoramas

Sun, look out for yourself!

—A.J. Wiertz, *Oeuvres littéraires* (Paris, 1870), p. 374

Just as architecture, with the first appearance of iron construction, begins to outgrow art, so does painting, in its turn, with the first appearance of the panoramas. The high point in the diffusion of panoramas coincides with the introduction of arcades. One sought tirelessly, through technical devices, to make panoramas the scenes of a perfect imitation of nature. An attempt was made to reproduce the changing daylight in the landscape, the rising of the moon, the rush of waterfalls. «Jacques-Louis» David counsels his pupils to draw from nature as it is shown in panoramas. In their attempt to produce deceptively lifelike changes in represented nature, the panoramas prepare the way not only for photography but for «silent» film and sound film.

Contemporary with the panoramas is a panoramic literature. *Le Livre des cent-et-un* [The Book of a Hundred-and-One], *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* [The French Painted by Themselves], *Le Diable à Paris* [The Devil in Paris], and *La Grande Ville* [The Big City] belong to this. These books prepare the belletristic