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"IN HIS BLOOD THE PLUNGE AND RISE OF ELEVATORS": POSTHUMAN MANHATTAN IN STEVEN MILLHAUSER'S MARTIN DRESSLER

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Abstract: *In his novel Martin Dressler (1997), contemporary American author Steven Millhauser writes an alternative, fictional history of urban development in 19th century Manhattan to resettle the perceived boundaries between the human and the non-human. More precisely, Millhauser explores the relationship between human being and artefacts in the metropolis, to reflect the increasing reification of the individual in the context of modern excessive production. As I shall argue in the present essay, the novel adopts a subtle yet convincing posthuman perspective, which he inscribes into the context of 19th century Manhattan to suggest that the exhaustion of the human started occurring already more than a century ago. Since posthumanism is associated especially with the end of the 20th century, what the novel represents is, I argue, a form of avant la lettre posthumanism that reveals the embryonic stage of the more recent phenomenon of reification.*

The essay is divided into two halves that each deals with the trajectory of the title character. The first half discusses Martin Dressler's spectacular material and class ascendancy from his humble beginnings, and the second one, his descendant trajectory. Martin's ascendancy is connected with his efforts to reorganize and redefine a chaotic, modern Manhattan from an architectural point of view, at the end of the 19th century. His descendant trajectory results from his failure to do so. Apart from the issues of spatiality, temporality plays a key role in the novel, considering the impermanent nature of both Manhattan and modernity itself. The impossibility of a transhistorical human essence is also seen in relationship with the posthumanist approach to the novel.

Steven Millhauser's novel *Martin Dressler: The Tale of an American Dreamer*, that received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1997, takes its title from the main fictional character in the novel, Martin Dressler. It is the story of a shop owner's son who succeeds in putting his most extravagant dreams into practice, thus seemingly impersonating the American Dream. In fact, Millhauser places this narrative in Manhattan at the end of the 19th century to rewrite a period in the history of New York from an end of the 20th century critical perspective.

As a tale about an insatiable capitalist who is endlessly keen on material progress, the novel is equally a parable about Manhattan's both architectural and economic growth at the *fin de siècle*. The author's point of view reflects his 20th century scepticism of excessive material progress, his fear that the object will fast

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replace the human, eliminating him from history. *Martin Dressler* thus explores the relationship between human and material object in the specific urban context of congested Manhattan, warning of the individual's loss of humanity as a result of his reification. As I shall argue in this essay, the novel adopts a subtle yet convincing posthuman perspective, which it projects into 19th century Manhattan to indicate that such a replacement of the human started occurring already more than a century ago. Since posthumanism is associated especially with the end of the 20th century, what occurs in the novel is, I argue, a form of *avant la lettre* posthumanism, or proto-posthumanism that goes far in dismantling a strictly anthropocentric perspective upon city history.

The novel is divided into twenty-eight chapters, each of which is named after the main item, character, place, or event at the centre of each section: "Dressler's Cigars and Tobacco", "Charley Stratemeyer", "West Brighton", "The Vanderlyn Hotel", "Room", "A Business Venture", and the list continues.

Martin Dressler, the title character, succeeds in fulfilling his wildest dreams already by his thirty- third anniversary. A mere helper in his family's small cigar shop at the beginning of the novel, he soon starts climbing the ladder of success, from a hotel cigar store clerk to bellhop at the age of fourteen, to day clerk, then to personal secretary of the hotel manager. Everywhere he cuts an insidious, narrow path of innovation and change.

Barely reaching adulthood, Martin decides to purchase an outmoded hotel in Manhattan, Vanderlyn Hotel, which he radically renovates and improves, employing the most advanced industrial engineering methods and devices to refurbish it. It is here that we already witness Martin's uncanny desire to go beyond the mere pragmatic uses of hotel space, whose limits he already starts challenging. A few years later, he purchases an even bigger, more modern hotel which he renovates and to which he lends his own name, Dressler, in a symbolic merge between man and building. Daring in design and innovative in functions, the Dressler hotel is a phenomenon never previously seen in Manhattan, marking the love of progress and extravagance typical of the age.

Always trying for further success and without much respite, Martin's next achievement is the New Dressler – this time, a structure built entirely under his supervision rather than renovated. The gigantic, twenty-four-story building represents Martin's reiterated attempt at synthesizing the functions of New York City modern architecture in a single, total structure. An elaborate world in itself, the eclectic edifice is at the same time a department store, a skyscraper, a hotel, a museum and a vacation retreat, a replica deemed both more comfortable and cheaper than reality.

Never content with his achievements, Martin next devises the Grand Cosmo, his most astonishing vision yet. The product of unrestrained imagination, partly real and partly grotesque, the Grand Cosmo challenges the very limits of comprehension. "An eighth wonder of the world" (265) that claims to redefine the very concept of living, the Grand Cosmo goes beyond language's own capacity to designate it, which increases people's confusion concerning its nature and function. With its several subterranean levels and a plethora of amenities, it is not only a self-sufficient, endless world that declares the city "superfluous" (265) but

it strives to comprise within itself the whole universe, real, man-made and imaginary. Yet, such a megalomaniac building gradually becomes less and less popular, thus revealing its deeply impractical nature and the financial disaster that it represents. Reduced to the status of a phantom inhabiting his own world, Martin has to liquidate, accepting the idea of transience at the very heart of his city and century.

As a late 20th century rewriting of the American narrative of success, the novel starts with the basic outline of the realistic plot typical of the American tale of fulfillment ("a man named Martin Dressler rose from modest beginnings to a height of dreamlike fortune" (1)). In fact, as a parable, the novel underlines the fragile and impermanent nature of the American Dream ("this is a perilous privilege, which the gods watch jealously, waiting for the flaw, the little flaw, that brings everything to ruin, in the end" (2)). More precisely, the story deals with the disastrous consequences of the modern Ego's self-aggrandizing seen as an irrepressible desire to change the face of the city and redefine space. This supposes populating the metropolis with more and more spectacular buildings, in the context of the unlimited economic prosperity of *fin de siècle* Manhattan. Increasingly idolized, the buildings reach a stage of self-sufficiency which renders the human implicitly redundant. As a result of this, as well as several other factors, a dethroning of the human seems to have ensued as early as the 19th century, in the sense that it no longer occupies "a natural and eternal place at the very center of things, where it is distinguished absolutely from machines, animals, and other inhuman entities", as the humanist tradition perceived it (Badmington 374). Instead, theorists of the posthuman[1] talk about a process of "relativization of the human that follows from its coupling … to some other order of being" (374). As this recent direction in cultural studies insists, "humans … are the products of historical and cultural differences that invalidate any appeal to a *universal, transhistorical human essence*" (374; *underl. mine*), which is also apparent in *Martin Dressler*. The issue of historicity is crucial in the novel, which stages the impossibility of a transhistorical human essence, as mentioned above. Historicity is precisely that which fundamentally undermines the protagonist's attempts at fulfillment, reinforcing the transitory character of his transformations in the city. The novel is ultimately concerned with the fractures induced by history, despite the main character's desperate efforts to subsume and defy such ruptures through his monumental architectural endeavours. As such, Martin's efforts, although superhuman, are strictly, fatally circumscribed both by Manhattan's legendary transitory nature and by the modern paradigm itself. Transitoriness in Manhattan is primarily related to the need to make constant room for new urban structures, owing to the physical lack of space that defines that island configuration. Martin's efforts are also delimited by the ephemeral nature of modernity itself. Modernity is precisely that "environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world - and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are" (Berman 15). The turn of the twentieth century appears as a

[1] Such as Donna Harraway (in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*), Bruce Clarke (in *Posthuman Metamorphosis: Narrative and Systems*), Neil Badmington (*Posthumanism*), Stefan Herbrechter (*Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*), and many others.

creative and at the same time destructive force which pours the protagonist as well as the city itself "into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish" (15). In what follows, I uncover the ultimately posthuman character of Martin Dressler's architectural endeavours in Manhattan, in the specific spatial and temporal context of the metropolis.

The Ascendant Trajectory of Martin Dressler: Recodifying the City

The rags-to-riches myth that the novel places centrally is a "true American article of faith" (Reitano 79), whose most famous representation was for a long time *Ragged Dick*, Horatio Alger's highly influential nineteenth century novel. Dick's smooth narrative of ascent and progress offered some comfort to the city dweller through emphasizing the vivifying role of the individual in an impersonal world of merciless industrialism (79) that lacked both morality and compassion.

The rags-to-riches formula that Steven Millhauser employs here apparently complies with the prototype, but in fact insidiously questions it. The initial, classical theme of fulfillment is deviated from, as the novel shows the underside of such an ideal whose connotations of material excess and compulsiveness it stresses, while revealing its ultimately dystopian outcome.

The late 19th century, when the narrative unfolds, is presented as a time characterised by an absolute faith in the future, "the grandeur of which experts and philosophers are prophesizing, and the reality of which, without doubt, will surpass the dreams of our imagination" (Buck-Morss 262).

Dressler's ascendant trajectory reflects the epoch's general trust in progress and infinite material achievement. In New York City, success seemed to float in the air, ready to transform anyone's innovative ideas into capital, as "on any streetcorner of America you might see some ordinary-looking citizen who was destined to invent a new kind of bottlecap or tin can, start a chain of five-cent stores, sell a faster and better elevator, or open a fabulous new department" (Millhauser 1). As I will show, the author questions such a myth of success, in the context of the age's fascination with an abundant world of objects.

The pure enjoyment of the spectacle of things around him is one of Martin's defining characteristics all along the plot. What fascinates Martin is the colourful, plentiful and varied material world at the *fin de siècle* in Manhattan, the labels on the cigar boxes and the exotic worlds that they project, "an Indian on a horse . . ., a boy and his dog by a swimming hole, an Egyptian woman with bare breasts and a gold bracelet on her upper arm" (4).

Significantly, even Martin's childhood mental mapping of the metropolis is done in terms of merchandise. To the very young boy already, what rendered the city a meaningful entity were the connections between commodities and architectural structures. The luxurious items on sale, the department stores typical of the nineteenth century and the repetitive parcels of the Manhattan grid were thus necessarily linked together, forming a whole: "not only that all the toy fire engines and diamond necklaces and leather gloves were different parts of one big department store, but... the store itself was part of a block of buildings and all the blocks went repeating themselves, rectangle by rectangle, in every direction, until they formed a

city" (58). Thus, Martin's mental map bespeaks his system of values as well as his parameters for intimately sensing the city's capitalist logic and understanding the reality of his time. In his view, the meaning of the metropolis radiates directly from the fetishised goods placed centrally in a structure of significance that constitutes the essence of capitalism. The part stands for the whole in a relationship that commodifies Manhattan while also rendering it self-sufficient.

Martin's perception of reality in terms of the products of his age continues with his later fascination with the department store. One of the main inventions of industrial modernity in the metropolis, the large department store is a true locus of enchantment for both Martin and the entire *fin de siècle*. Walter Benjamin in particular spoke about the nineteenth century citizen's attraction for the innumerable economic and technological innovations characterising the metropolises at that time. They comprised emerging luxury goods, interior design, panoramas, as well as parades, fairs, street lights, fashion and magnificent, new building structures like the large department store and the shopping arcade. Such items and constructions mesmerized viewers, generating "the phantasmagoric effect", as designated by Benjamin (qtd. in GUST 114), namely a state of fascination typical of the 19th century citizen who enthused at the thought of spectacular material novelty. Just as it is the case with Martin's hotels, which constantly strived for amazement, the shocks of innovation at the time, "the 'kick' of the new"[2] produced euphoric emotions amongst urbanites. They fuelled historical optimism and the dreams of progress, of increasing prosperity and unlimited expansion (114-5).

In the department stores, Martin finds direct inspiration for the functional design of his own hotels, owing to their compact, orderly and at the same time comprehensive structure, containment being one of the main characteristics of his age. Adopting such configurations within his hotels requires a constant effort of spatial compression, in the context of an ever expanding modernity that kept redefining itself at the time.

What Martin endeavours to accomplish in his hotels is primarily a synthesis of his time. He attempts to offer his customers a more comfortable, condensed yet "truthful" version of an age which he sees as violently disruptive and discontinuous. It is a process of recoding New York City, a means of ordering and containing within a hotel (and then another, and another) the aggressive urban and architectural transformation of Manhattan at the turn of the 20th century. But such a process also leads to unavoidable falsification through rigid mortification of the living character of Manhattan, of the city's "the terrible restlessness, its desire to overthrow itself, to smash itself to bits and burst into new forms" (235). Martin's desire of expressing "in a single building what the city was expressing separately in its hotels and skyscrapers and department stores" (235) is a megalomaniac dream that deprives the city of its ardent variety and dynamism.

In order to reach his purpose, Martin has to deal with the respective *Zeitgeist* of irrepressible eclecticism. He must reproduce "the tendency of modern structures to embrace and enclose as many different elements as possible" (194) in

[2] In Benjamin's own words (qtd. in GUST 115).

his hotels: proximity and remoteness, past and present, the real and the fictitious, European and American history as well as technology. A process of both spatial and temporal contraction is therefore required by such an ample process of integration. In fact, owing to its rigid, grid structure, Manhattan itself is built according to principles of high spatial density, which is the main cause of its legendary congestion.[3]

Just like the large department stores of the time, Martin's hotels are worlds in themselves, little cities within the city that serve "a single idea" (181) in their striving to essentialise and contain the world of modernity. They represent self-sufficient spaces that offer customers comfort and instantaneous gratification, persuading them "that they never had to leave, since everything they desired was immediately at hand" (181), from cigar stands and newsstands to beauty parlours (179).

The cushioned interiors of Martin'shotels reverse the notion of transitoriness that typically defines this kind of buildings. At the beginning of mass production and standardization, his hotel lobbiesare the perfect embodiment of the homely, as they mimic the function of domestic interiors as de-standardized simulacra whose artificially created plenitude and intimacy provide total isolation from the world outside. With their "heavy drapes along the high windows, [their] tapestry-upholstered armchairs beside their reading lamps, [their] open doors leading to softly lit reading rooms or private lounges" that result in cocoon-like spaces, they represent "an invitation to put oneself at ease, to escape from the harshness of the world into a pleasant haven that was itself a little world, with carefully controlled excitements of its own" (195). Such stifling extravagance bespeaks respectability and wealth coupled with notions of reverie and escapism typical of late Victorianism.

New York itself becomes a tamed, miniaturized reproduction of the real city in a souvenir shop in Martin's New Vanderlyn hotel. It is a New York that sells as

> postcards showing views of El stations and East River ferries, sets of porcelain salt-and-pepper shakers
> shaped like bellboys and maids, cast-iron Broadway cable-car banks, tin wind-up express wagons drawn by two horses, toy wooden barges loaded with little barrels and sacks, and optical fountain pens that revealed, when you unscrewed the cap and held it to your eye, a tiny color transparency of the Brooklyn Bridge against a brilliant blue sky. (180)

To contain what he perceives as multiple, chaotic modernity, Martin operates exclusively at a material level which in fact conforms to the spirit of his

[3] The Manhattan grid is an arbitrary, geometrical pattern superimposed on the city as a result of the City Commissioners' Plan implemented in 1811. Adopted for strictly financial and utilitarian purposes and described as a combination of "beauty, order and convenience" (qtd. in Burrows and Wallace 419), the Grid divided what had been initially a varied, rich, diverse type of space into equal, rectangular blocks of land. Financially controlling the city's growth, such a coherent, homogenous pattern is a typical Enlightenment structure that implicitly claims reason's superiority over nature.

time. Each of his new hotels represents a larger amassing of the most various items, as he never ceases relishing “the sheer splendid sound of things” (56). It is an ever reiterated, centripetal effort towards completion which results in greater and greater congestion of inside spaces. As Martin’s created world of objects becomes denser and denser and increasingly stifling, it gradually alienates the people who are supposed to inhabit his hotels rather than continue serving these people’s purposes.

The most magnificent of Martin’s hotels, significantly called “the Dressler” reifies the very present in its interior. It devoids it of its human element through rendering it a museum exhibit, as in the case of the full-sized Victorian interior that is on display on one of the hotel’s floors. This displacement of the present is actually what marks the beginning of the transition from a human dimension of space seen as homely to the uncanny, posthuman element within Martin’s hotels. Later, another of Martin’s hotels will expose a highly detailed, miniature version of Manhattan’s recent past, including “not only every house, farm, hotel, church, commercial building, pleasure garden, and wharf, not only automated horsecars and omnibuses running up and down the avenues”, but also 10,000 reconstructed miniature people “in individual dress” (239). Both such attempts aim at recreating the reality effect through sheer amount, size and number and mark the demise of the human through its replacement with mannequins. This shows how the present itself is instantaneously commodified and offered to the urban gaze in ephemeral New York City, a process which renders it a source of touristic attraction and financial gain. It is an objectified version of reality that, through extreme detail and ineffective “individualization” of its elements (the 10,000 miniature people are clad “in individual dress”), strives to deny the gross simplification that it operates.

Yet, Martin insists “to hold it all in his eye in a single glance” (215). At a central point in the novel, he himself is shown to transcend his human characteristics. He turns a gigantic self struggling to control multiplicity, a God-like hypostasis of the individual in his hotel-haven, from which he aspires to simultaneous totality and containment. His look searches and inventories one of his hotels until he “seemed to hold in his mind the entire contents of the building – and almost reeling under the weight of images he would return inside with a sense of seeking relief from an attack of dizziness” (215). It is an attempt that forces the very limits of the human.

Martin’s efforts to contain and represent a synthesis of his own city and times in all their dazzling variety gradually reveal the obsessive and unrealistic side of such an enterprise. Highly contradictory, his attempt can only end in failure as the fractures that mark his endeavours become more and more visible.

All through the novel Martin’s view of the ethnic other never departs from the late Victorian stereotypes familiar to him since childhood. His view of the ethnic other dehumanises the latter who remains a colourful selling accessory and a matter of ornament and display in Martin’s perspective.

As a boy, we see Martin fascinated by the bright representations on the tobacco products in his father’s shop. The “Egyptian woman with bare breasts and a gold bracelet on her upper arm, sitting in a little white boat and trailing her fingers in flowery lily pads” (5), that he repeatedly contemplates, is the perfect example of tamed exoticism with mild erotic undertones designed for the European and American bourgeois taste of the age.

A leitmotif of the novel is Tecumseh, a wooden tobacco sale accessory inspired from the Native American figure. Its various utilities along the plot are significant for Martin's perception of otherness as well as for a dehumanized view of difference in the age. Thus, the carved representation of an old Tecumseh at the beginning of the novel is the lucky charm of Martin's father tobacco store. An item exposed daily in the shop to encourage sales, its description is worth a more detailed analysis. The pose popularly associated with Native Americans, that of "shading [their] eyes with one hand" (2), which here makes the figure easily identifiable to the buyer, is in this case completed by Tecumseh holding "a bundle of wooden cigars" (2) in the other hand. Seemingly offering cigars to potential buyers, such a posture underlines the commodified as well as derisory position to which the dignified Shawnee warrior is symbolically reduced in the late nineteenth century metropolis. It also bespeaks a society that, in its exclusive focus on profitable selling, carelessly reinforces a false, servile stance of the ethnic other. Devoid of all historical reference and arbitrarily associated with a high class, urban product such as the cigar, Tecumseh becomes a mere floating signifier, like many others in the book, a mark of both early and our own, late capitalism.

Equally relevant in connection with the idea of dehumanisation in the novel is the scene in which Martin purchases another "Indian" figure for the hall of the Vanderlyn hotel. Also on sale at the shop where he buys the Native American wooden mannequin are "brave young scouts and bosomy squaws, and here and there a different sort of figure who also held out a bundle of cigars: a Blackamoor with a brilliant red turban, a Highlander in a kilt, a fashionable lady wearing boots, a Chinaman in a pigtail holding a large box in both hands destined for a tea store" (43). This is the whole scanty map of Victorian representations of difference, a small world of submissive, colourful, fair-like mannequins that can be read as a true exhibition of posthuman figures. What Martin chooses in the end is an "Indian chief, a little smaller than life-sized" (43). It carries the inevitable cigars in one hand and a tomahawk in the other hand, in an attitude of decorative, derisive violence. The "Indian" will be later positioned in the hotel lobby where, attached to his tomahawk, he will carry a sign that announces "GRAND OPENING" (43), Martin's planned opening of the cigar stand. In this hypostasis, the "Indian" is twice objectified and degraded, not only as a cigar advertising emblem but also as a mere signpost for a banal event announcement, the Native American's identity turned into a mere accessory in the service of the anonymous city. Seen exclusively in terms of their selling capacity, historical figures are accordingly decontextualized and recontextualized in the novel to critically increase their marketing attributes, and implicitly, their degree of dehumanisation.

Later in the plot, "Indians" multiply and turn robotic in a meticulously recreated Grand Cosmo Cigar Store. Here they perform mechanical movements such as "raising and lowering tomahawks and in one case walking slowly up and down the length of the room with a menacing expression" (269). This last, unique mechanical "Indian" who is proof of even more advanced technology increases the overall nightmarish nature of the place and reinforces the grotesque and ultimately posthuman dimension of the plot.

Thus, the protagonist can only provide more detailed, mechanically perfected depictions of the ethnic other in the metropolis. As is the case with attempting to capture the essence of his own time in his hotels, Martin's representations of otherness turn derisory. Despite their elaborate nature and their amplitude, they can only underline the proportional diminishment of human characteristics in the general fascination with replicas typical of the age.

The Excessive World of Dressler's Hotels: The World Decodified

Prosperity in the late nineteenth century was manifested primarily as an increase in the number of objects. A true cult of the object emerged whose roots can be traced back to the older Victorian passion for collecting, in a specific colonial context. Available in greater and greater abundance with the surge of industrialism at the time, products started forming a universe of their own, their practical, immediate purpose coming only second to the mere fascination that their rich variety caused. This, for example, is the procession of items carried by the hotel residents where Martin worked as a bellboy: "leather Gladstone bags with nickel corner protectors, slim leather dress-suit cases, soft alligator-skin satchels, pebble leather club bags, English cabinet bags, canvas telescope bags with leather straps, hatboxes, black umbrellas with hooked handles, colored silk umbrellas with pearl handles, white silk parasols with ruffles, packages tied with string" (21). Although employed here to suggest the eccentricity of a prosperous middle class, the items in question seem to acquire an existence of their own through their dizzying multiplicity and variety suggestive of a true cult of the object and of its fetishization.

The protagonist's more and more extravagant hotel interiors, where the most unexpected items are gathered, go well beyond the Victorian mania for collecting. What Martin intended was no less than to "abolish the expected" (266) in order to exceed his customers' all possible anticipation. This is apparent in the New Dressler and especially in his last hotel, the Grand Cosmo, where his obsessive embracing of material extravagance will lead to the construction of several spectacular sites such as "the Pleasure Park", "Haunted Grotto", "Moorish Bazaar", "Hidden New York", "Pantheatrikon", "Séance Parlor" and many others, all under the same roof. Such phantasmagoric places are erected in detail *inside* the hotel, which hints at the theatrical nature of the modern age in New York City and in general. In fact, similar buildings were raised in Manhattan also in reality if one is to mention only the 1893 Madison Square Garden Hall where "a gigantic panorama of the Chicago Exposition" was set up together with "replicas of the Globe Theatre, old Nuremberg, Dickens' London and the City of Venice, the visitors floating from exhibit to exhibit in gondolas" (Koolhaas 94). Thus, despite its overwhelming fictitiousness, the novel proves equally realistic in its reinforcing Manhattan's own fascination with an excessive material culture almost bordering on the oneiric.

Another significant example in this sense combines the fascination for merchandize and the idea of display, two key elements of Manhattan at that time. Thus, walking on Broadway while still a child, Martin knew each window and awning well: the paper and twine window under its green-and-white- striped awning, the window of derbies and fedoras under its red-and-white striped awning,

the window of umbrellas and walking sticks under its brown-and-white-striped awning, the window of ladies' dress trimmings (Millhauser 10)

Enumerated here are the main accessories of bourgeois respectability: the hat,[4] the umbrella, the walking stick, trimmings for ladies' dresses, and many others. The image of display windows is insistently repeated in the quote to designate a world that encourages the spectacular, merry show of products. The protagonist's early childhood walks past the shop windows on Broadway are also at the root of his later fascination with the grand department stores. Towards the end of the novel, the sensations procured by such early walks will be recreated and amplified in Martin's Grand Cosmo, where spectacularly arranged "vistas of glass" holding "beautiful frozen mannequins" emphasize the protagonist's enthrallment with a dramatic "world behind glass" (243). As one theoretician put it, "the new urban phantasmagoria was not so much the commodity-in-the-market as the commodity-on-display, where exchange value no less than use value lost practical meaning, and purely representational value came to the fore" (Buck-Morss 258). What the novel has here in view is not only the 19th century but equally the late 20th century Manhattan. More precisely, the author is speaking about late 20th century's own preference for the fascinating world of commodities, the result of a culture of intensified mass production and consumption. Stressing the idea of the exposed merchandise, the novel implies that commodification and display were as much a characteristic of the industrial past as are of our own, present time. The absurd level of commodification attained at the end of the 19th century is suggestive of the late 20th century avid consumerism and cult of the object. Martin Dressler's recreated world inside his last hotels – the New Dressler and the Grand Cosmo– proves to be but an ample posthuman phantasmagoria. The earliest sign of this is the inoffensive, bi- dimensional mechanical display in one of Martin's cafes' windows that represents "a wooden face in profile" next to "a flat wooden cup of coffee [that] slowly rose and fell, rose and fell" with the head "tipped back as if to drink" (131). A not much later but much more elaborate exhibit is the "moving panorama called *A Steamboat Journey up the Hudson and Along the Erie Canal to Niagara,* accompanied by sound effects such as booming thunder and steamboat whistles" (239) that Martin reconstructs in his New Dressler hotel. Part of this phantasmagoria is also the fully three-dimensional, robotic "Indian" that paces one of the Grand Cosmo rooms (cf. 269). We see in these three instances a progressive desire to replace reality with more and more ambitious, increasingly "realistic" reconstructions of it. With its raised tomahawk and its menacing expression, that only mechanical "Indian" that can walk suggests an evolved specimen of automata seemingly on the brink of turning (post)human. This alludes to the indistinguishable character of the machine and the human or of the copy and the original as one of the trademarks of both late 19th and late 20th century. Such a robotic entity represents in fact a cyborg, one of those ambiguous, "odd boundary creatures" in Donna Haraway's definition (2). It expresses "the changeability and relativity of human

[4] The central elements of the description and especially the hat seem to recall some of Magritte's surrealist paintings, without the painter's corrosive intentions though.

nature" (Herbrechter 12) which is shown to be here appropriated by a machine. The reference is to the "the transgression and erasure of boundaries between . . . the organic and inorganic, between human and machine" that "have undermined the inviolability of the human" (42) in the late twentieth century paradigm, problematizing and redefining it in the context of the new technological society. With its threatening mien, the "Indian" stands for yet another instance of the uncanny,[5] as reason is gradually being exceeded by the irrational in the novel. Most consistently, irrationality is apparent in the protagonist's megalomaniac attempt to replicate within the Grand Cosmo not only New York City, not only modernity itself but ultimately the human, together with the microcosm and the macrocosm. An absurd dimension defines such a world where the utter fascination for objects, for the commodity fetish leads to the reification and alienation of the human. The latter feels even more estranged from the hotel interiors that he/she is supposed to inhabit.

Yet another cause of material excess in the book is related to New York's own expansion, intensified by continual processes of urbanization and imbedded in the very structure of the Manhattan grid. It was a time when new building foundations were dug up on a daily basis since "in New York we travel heavenward as well as on the surface", as an architect put it in 1910 (qtd. in Koolhaas 89). Martin perceived the centrifugal, expansive drive of modernity rather early in life, when he was still a child.

While bathing in the ocean, he had the revelation of Manhattan radiating progress in the entire world, as a modern *umbilicus mundi*:

> [H]ere at the world's end, the world didn't end: iron piers stretched out over the ocean, iron towers pierced the sky, somewhere under the water a great telegraph cable longer than the longest train stretched past sunken ships and octopuses all the way to England – and Martin had the odd sensation, as he stood quietly in the lifting and falling waves, that the world, immense and extravagant, was rushing away in every direction: behind him the fields were rolling into Brooklyn and Brooklyn was rushing into the river, before him the waves repeated themselves all the way to the hazy shimmer of the horizon, in the river between the two cities the bridge piers went down through the water to the river bottom and down through the river bottom halfway to China, while up in the sky the steam-driven elevators rose higher and higher and they became invisible in the hot blue summer haze. (Millhauser 17)

Martin's identification with one of his hotels, as a true embodiment of the inflated, modern self is a central instance of the posthuman in the novel. While walking through the then empty building of the Vanderlyn Hotel, the protagonist has

[5] The explanation that Freud gives to the term *heimlich* ("familiar", "homely") is that one of its meanings is identical with its opposite*, unheimlich*. "What is *heimlich* thus comes to be *unheimlich*. . . . In general we are reminded that the word *heimlich* is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which, without being contradictory, are yet very different: on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight" (*The Uncanny*). The "Indian" robot is such a presence in which a familiar identity becomes suddenly unfamiliar through mechanization, or a robot/doll becomes itself unfamiliar due to the human attributes that it has appropriated.

a vision of his literal, ecstatic merging with the edifice. His body's functions seem to be taken over by those of the construction, as if they represent but one gigantic being: "[i]t was as if the structure were his own body, his head piercing the clouds, his feet buried deep in the earth, and in his blood the plunge and rise of elevators" (174).

In line with the protagonist's efforts at densification, his Dressler hotel comes close to an autotelic building. As a "fever-dream of stone, an extravaganza in the wilderness", the hotel's guiding principle is the frustration of all expectations, taking into consideration its maze-like structure, its "pleasurable diversity, a sense of spaces opening out endlessly, of turnings and twistings, of new discoveries beyond the next door" (196-97). With its "block-long" surface (210), with its ability to accommodate a great number of facilities as well as fantasies and with the heavy ornamentation of its gluttonous world, the Dressler seems to take "sheer delight in itself" (210), thus implicitly dealing away with all human presence or notion of utility. This underlines both the building's narcissism and Martin's own conceit apparent in his identification with the imposing construction to which he has lent his own name. We witness the hotel's personification and the protagonist's own objectification, as person and object exchange ontological natures which signals the already posthuman character the modern self. More specifically, posthumanism is brought to mind by the ambiguity of human nature, which is seen as no longer pure and identical to itself but as sharing the same nature as an inanimate object – a hotel in this particular case. Martin's merging with his gigantic building also renders literal Rem Koolhaas's assertion that "[i]n the single block – the largest possible area that can fall under architectural control - [Manhattan] develops a maximum unit of urbanistic Ego" (20). The Dressler hotel's pleasure in itself thus reflects the City's own narcissism at a time when it became "its own empire" (Reitano 84). In fact, Manhattan's arrogant idea of *total architecture*[6] and its notion of self-glorification had a more general tendency to exclude the human, as nearly each building there was turned into a mere laboratory of architectural experimentation around the beginning of the twentieth century (cf. Koolhaas 91).

The hotel that Martin completely identifies with is his 1905 Grand Cosmo, the last building in the novel, for which the concept of "hotel" is already both insufficient and dated. The construction challenges all possible definition and becomes ultimately incomprehensible to the ordinary customer who "didn't know exactly what it was" (Millhauser 264). A floating signifier, it is a "meaningless sign" into which Martin's advertisers struggle to "breathe meaning" (263). The building certainly denies the transitory, supplementary role typical of hotels, reinventing it while also reversing it. Aspiring to permanence and totality, it insists that it renders the very city unnecessary (265) and arrogantly aims to replace it. As a self-sufficient entity that has dealt away with all idea of human residence, the Grand Cosmo is content to merely pursue its own, "private existential journey" typical of the future Manhattan skyscraper (Koolhaas 91).

[6] "Total architecture!" is what one of the utopian architects exclaimed in connection to Manhattan, in 1905 (qtd. in Koolhaas 91).

As such, the Grand Cosmo becomes the sign of its own destruction owing to the impossible tension between autotelism and excess that define it. As a "complete and self-sufficient world" (265), it is similar to a cocoon that refuses further evolution. Yet, in spite of dreams of eternal durability, the hotel proves to be an integral part of the inconstancy and ephemerality that have always defined Manhattan during the modern age and beyond.

A final refusal of fulfillment and completeness are precisely the features that define Martin Dressler's short creative destiny. The clash with history has proved destructive for the protagonist. Fast as the hero moves, modernity moves even faster and so does Manhattan itself in "the sound of New York tossing its traditions in the air and devouring its own landmarks" (Koolhaas 91). It is a speedy rhythm of renewal and change that the leading character himself is familiar with, that he himself has substantially contributed to. The view of the creative process that the novel projects no longer conforms to a Romantic ideal of durability. The artistic product is no longer seen as capable of transcending its temporal and spatial limits while sublimely triumphing as the purest expression of the human spirit. The novel does not follow the classical ideal of originality associated with the figure of the "creator"; the utopia of the human as the ultimate conqueror has reached its end. Martin's achievements are ultimately a matter of redistributing anew artefacts that already exist, a fact which counteracts his efforts towards magnificent originality. What they render is a vulgarized view of history and of exotic otherness that recalls theme parks and present day Disneyland: the jungle in Martin's Grand Cosmo contains "stuffed lions" (266), the Moorish Bazaar has "dusty lanes" and "sales clerks dressed as Arabs and trained in the art of bargaining"
(267). Besides, size and an irrational accumulation of material items prevail over all traces of sublime uniqueness. Notwithstanding the solid structures of his buildings, Martin himself feels that they are "more dream than stone, dream-stone, dream-steel, forever unlasting" (288), as he himself finally admits despite his initial arrogance. This is a reversed image of the American Dream that hints at its inconsistent nature, its vain belief in endless expansion and growth. In fact, the novel shows that such parameters are impossible to sustain in a strict historical context and in a finite material reality.

In the novel, Martin's efforts to compress and tame the Manhattan version of modernity in his edifices ultimately deny the utility and human dimensions of his buildings, propelling them into posthuman grotesque. His attempts to recreate his place and age in a more accessible, coherent and simultaneously exhaustive form prove fatally simplistic. This is a megalomaniac undertaking that can only result in crude mechanical reductions, considering the specific context of permanent expansion and excess typical of Manhattan and the *fin de siècle* paradigm.

Martin embodies the displacement of the individual who is shown to be gradually replaced by the substantial rule of artefacts starting with the 19th century already. Such a process occurs with the human's own fascinated contribution and as the direct result of his existential trajectory as an avid consumer of commodities.[7]

[7] The novel also recalls Baudrillard's *The System of Objects* (1968) as well as *Simulacra and Simulations* (1981).

The irrational and excessive dimension of the 19th century industrial age is suggested to lie at the root of late 20th century wasteful production and consumption of material goods, as the author links the two periods together in highly disquieting ways. Questioning the very idea of existential progress between the two ages in the metropolis, what *Martin Dressler* demonstrates is that we were already posthuman at the end of the 19th century.

The novel also concerns the manner in which Martin, the megalomaniac man of the industrial society, is rendered powerless when confronted with time and history. *Martin Dressler* is implicitly a plea for humbly taking historicity into account with its propensity for circumscribing and limiting the exaggerated upsurge of the ego, especially in a city defined by change such as New York. Architectural achievements tend to be perishable in Manhattan considering the place's ethos of permanent destruction and renewal and in the context of ephemeral modernity.

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