
Basement Gothic

Describing the open house John Soane held at 13 Lincoln’s Inn Fields in 1825, Barbara Hofland wrote—in the last edition of Soane’s *Description* in 1835—of the “glorious visions of the past” that had been staged there.¹ Hofland described an event in which a particular scene and its atmospherics shared the stage with the visitors themselves. But 13 Lincoln’s Inn Fields was by this time no longer strictly a house but a hybrid museological and theatrical structure, the “glorious visions” of the event an accentuation of the effects-laden architectonics already at play in the house. In Hofland’s eyes the basement’s “Gothick” spaces—the monk’s chambers (a parlor, oratory, cell, and yard), crypt, catacombs, and sepulchral chamber—were the most impressive of those experienced by the public in 1825; it is these she evocatively dramatizes in the *Description*.

Held at night in early spring (March 23, 26, 30) to exploit not just lighting effects borrowed from London’s theater and commercial shows but also the possibilities afforded by darkness itself (a stage-managed gloom), the soirees focused the generation of special effects on the basement. The sparkling luminosity of the upper floors, fitting stage for the jewels of society gathered there, contrasted with the more dimly lit spaces below. Here was a subterranean labyrinth worthy of the best Gothic novels: scenes imbued with the romance of looming shadows and flickering lights, low vaults and narrow shafts, glowing effulgence and suggestive gloom. Hofland’s report focused on such effects, noting that the newly purchased sarcophagus (the motivation for the event) “sheds from within a pale, unearthly light upon the silent awe-struck beings that surround it,” a light that, like the “faint gleams that rise like *ignes fatui* from the adjoining crypt,” could barely illuminate the “deep masses of shadow.” Part memento mori, part supernatural thrill, these special effects ensured an impressed audience.²

The basement was even by day a theatricalized Gothic fiction, barely lit by narrow grills or small squares of glass. Today these spaces are barely recognizable, Soane’s carefully contrived mysterious lights and glooms mostly lost.³ But to take tea in the monk’s parlor in the nineteenth century would have meant an immersion not just in Gothic detailing and tectonics, but also in the illusion of a medieval scene. The catacombs, visible from the monk’s parlor, a stack of moldering
burial urns cast in an unearthly yellow light, prompted John Britton to invoke theatricality: “the light now streams down, in the most picturesque manner, into this angle, thereby producing a very striking bit of scenery.”

The lamplit watercolors of Soane’s basement produced by his draftsman, Joseph Michael Gandy, best render for us today the ways in which it was constructed as a sublimely mysterious space. Gandy’s own *Tomb of Merlin*, a radiant apparition, helps us understand what Soane’s presentation of the sarcophagus might have been like. Gandy “enjoyed the delusional and deceptive qualities of light and atmosphere, a world of luminous reflection, shadow projection and spectral hallucination,” and so it seems did Soane. The house was a phantasmagoric display and Soane, like the magician in his fictional 1812 history of the house, a creator of visions.
Theatricality had already infiltrated architecture, from the scenographic obsessions of the Italian Baroque or Britain’s John Vanbrugh (also a playwright), the ruin paintings of French artists like Charles-Louis Clérisseau, the concept of lumière mystérieuse derived from the Italian Baroque by French neoclassicists, to the “architecture of shadows” of Etienne-Louis Boullée, the sensationalism of Nicolas Le Camus de Mézières, and the work of Giovanni Battista Piranesi. Besides theaters and show halls, spaces like ballrooms, assembly halls, and pleasure gardens were central to a culture of social interaction understood as spectacular theater, while Horace Walpole’s Strawberry Hill and William Beckford’s Fonthill Abbey were examples of the domestic realm transformed into romantically contrived theatrical space. Architecture was used to frame and stage views—windows onto landscape, screens or porticos opening onto rooms—“to compose, order, and to pictorialize” views and entrances.

Theatrical terminology, derived from mid-eighteenth-century landscape gardening, permeated the aesthetic theories of the period, the words stage, staged, scenery, and scene appearing repeatedly, particularly in discussions of the sublime or the picturesque. Britton’s reference to the Catacombs as a “striking bit of scenery” repeated a phraseology that he could have found in any theory of the picturesque. The fashions for garden follies and pavilions that burgeoned in the middle of the eighteenth century created a taste for theatricality that Soane simply internalized, reproducing such conceits as a kind of “interior landscape.” Meanwhile, special effects rampaged across the popular shows that entertained London—through the theater itself and out into the parties, assemblies, and social gatherings of “polite society.” At 13 Lincoln’s Inn Fields Soane transferred these trends to an urban domestic architecture.

Soane’s house as the unfolding of a series of stage sets is most explicitly figured by the picture
room, a concatenated space unraveled through the dramatic process of revealing the layers that make up its walls, which successively open to reveal their secreted treasures like a series of changing scenes. Once the final set of paintings has been revealed on the south side, the innermost leaves open to dissolve the wall completely and unveil a space beyond framed as if it were a stage: a ledge holding works by Soane and a statue of a nymph, the niche framed by a proscenium-like device and a backdrop of luminescent colored glass with yellow stage lighting cast from above. Leaning out over the balcony edge to look below, the spectator views, as if from a theater box, the monk’s parlor—a stage decked out as a Gothic set within which guests perform a social vignette while imagining the fictional monk’s life. Across from the picture room’s balcony other spectators might also be viewed peering through the small window set into the wall of the corridor.

Both Lincoln’s Inn Fields and Soane’s short-lived country estate, Pitzhanger Manor, were spaces that had to be presented—unveiled (like the picture room’s walls) and toured.12 Pitzhanger, built in Ealing in 1800, was constructed as a self-consciously theatrical space, as indeed were many country estates, one in which the house and its grounds were to be understood together: it was a space in which people were to be entertained, a stage set in which the drama of the social world was to be played out. It was also a space that was to impress, with social success framed by the house and evidenced by the large numbers of visitors, as
well as through the cultivation and architectural creativity evidenced by the taste and originality embedded in the collections and the house itself. As such, it was the forerunner of the spectacular interiors of Lincoln’s Inn Fields, already a setting for “Gothic scenes and intellectual banquets.”

Spectators
In both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, “scenery” was emphasized as a way of describing the visual world and spectatorship as a way of consuming it, though in different ways. Joseph Addison wrote in the aptly named Spectator in 1711, “I live in the world, rather as a Spectator of mankind, than as one of the species.” The readers of the journal and the public more generally—“in short, everyone that considers the world as a theater”—were thus for Addison “a fraternity of spectators.” For the writers of the mid- and late-eighteenth century, however, the world as theater enabled an explicit connection to exist between the theater and street, allowing the codes of belief that operated in the former to apply and provide freedom within the latter. Sociability in public thus relied on an impersonal detachment from “role” and on emotion as a sign system (“sympathy”), allowing the public realm to become one of play (of playacting and playfulness). This relates to the notion of “character” found in architectural treatises of the time: a kind of typology of roles. Soane’s theatricality clearly has these eighteenth-century characteristics. The fictional personas he turned to—monk, reclusive hermit, necromancer, Rousseau-esque victim—are examples of theatrical role-playing, fictions, and stylizations of self.

As the eighteenth century gave way to the nineteenth, the notion of “scene” migrated from stage to street, landscape, even home. The world that had previously been understood as a collection of roles was becoming a collection of images: the “city of spectacles.” The public sphere was no longer a space of elaborate play but one of fleeting ephemeral impressions, more a matter of seeing and being seen than of acting out roles. In his account of London in Book VII of The Prelude—documenting his excursion through the city’s varied fabric in 1805—William Wordsworth described London as a spectacular milieu, providing a detailed recording that moves from the city fabric itself (buildings like Westminster Abbey and St. Paul’s), the streets and the crowds (a “moving pageant” and a dazzle of color, light, and form), to theater (including “pantomimic scenes”), shows (including waxworks and mechanical theatres), circuses, exhibitions, pleasure gardens (Vauxhall and Ranelagh), even the courts and Parliament. As Wordsworth’s lengthy account demonstrates, the Londoner of the early nineteenth century “consumed a proliferating range of optical and sensory experiences,” “an expanding chaos of
By the 1790s spectatorship also implied association, the generation of “pictures” in the mind. Archibald Alison, for instance, wrote in 1790: “Everyman must have felt, that the character of a scene is no sooner impressed upon his mind, than various trains of correspondent imagery rise before his imagination.”

For Alison, as with William Gilpin and Richard Payne Knight, the observer had become subjective, each viewing scenes in different ways and with different associations. This new observer, explored and valorized by romantic poets and artists from Blake to Turner, was now “an active, autonomous producer of his or her own visual experience.” Freed from the conventions of “sympathy,” the spectator was subjectively affected by the flow of temporalized images before him or her—by intensities, affects, associations, physiological effects of perception, temporal effects of shifting forms and atmospheres, and so on.

Coleridge took these theories further, distinguishing between fancy, the associative faculty; and imagination, the creative faculty. Fancy was characterized by finitude, remaining inseparably linked to the store of impressions, memories, and ideas of the perceiving subject’s sum of experiences. Imagination was limitless where fancy was limited, able to “dissolve, diffuse, dissipate” Alison’s “pictures in the mind” in order to create. Soane was to invoke this power: for him the architect needed “rich fancy and bold imagination . . . flights of powerful mind and magical genius.”

Soane built the museum spaces of the 1820s with these characteristics of the observer in mind, combining an eighteenth-century theatricality with this nineteenth-century model of visuality. The visual entertainments that Wordsworth recorded had by this time become sophisticated special-effects machines, from the pleasure gardens to the commercial shows. By the mid-1760s, lighting and stage-set design in the theater had improved, permitting more elaborate illusionistic methods that were exploited in the “spectacles,” a range of performances added to playbills and including scenes without actors that relied on the generation of special effects for entertainment value. Special effects were also the primary focus of emerging commercial shows such as Jacques de Loutherbourg’s Eidophusikon and Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre’s diorama. And it was their
adoption of mechanical and theatrical technologies to animate such scenes that in turn brought them close to the theater: they dramatized images, allowing them to shift from one scene, atmosphere, or effect to another; adding association, mood, and even narrative; in short, mutating scenery from image to action.

The hybridity of theater and spectacle was made stronger by the fluid movement of the technologies of special effects between the two domains—devices and techniques no sooner developed in one than appropriated by the other, even if the shows were better able to exploit them than was the theater until the mid-nineteenth century. Neither the Eidophusikon, the diorama, the panorama, nor, for that matter, Soane’s house-museum, were merely concerned with representation; they were above all spectacles, concerned, like the kaleidoscope that distorted and fragmented the world it mirrored, with the generation of effects.30

**Effects**

Effect is closely linked to theatricality: its original Latin root, *effectus*, means “a performing”; whereas “effects” are the assemblage of lighting, sound, and so on that augment and enhance stage productions or visual spectacles. Effect could also be used as a means of publicity, as it was in Soane’s house: a means of engaging the attention and admiration of the public. Demonstration—whether of scientific discoveries, technology, or creative genius—exploited, if it did not actually become, phantasmagoria. By the eighteenth century science had established an intimate connection with fiction (through the notion of “hypothesis”), and it remained linked to enchantment and conjuration through its conceptualization as “natural magic.” From here to the idea of the exhibition of scientific discovery to the public as fantastical spectacle was but a short step.31

The interest of architectural theory in the question of effect came through an appropriation of associational or picturesque theory, centered on the notion of “character.”32 By the early nineteenth century, particularly in France (the source for much of Soane’s architectural theory), character had become a central term. It governed the proper “fit” between architectural form, ornament, and program (“distribution”), the cultural and social status of a building or its owner, the relation between a building and its location, and the building’s expressive possibilities (the atmosphere, mood, sensations, or aesthetic tropes a building should evoke; the sublime being the paramount example). Importantly, both Germain Boffrand and Le Camus de Mézières explained character (linked to a theory of sensation in the latter) by turning to the analogy of the theater.33 It was “effect” that activated “character,” enabling the possibilities its theorization demanded.

It was perhaps Boullée who most fully developed the range of atmospheric
mood-inducing effects available to architecture, inventing what he termed the “architecture of shadows.” But it was Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy who defined effect, including it in his Dictionnaire d’architecture. Quatremère de Quincy centered the term on qualities of the surface, ones that would maximize contrasts of light and shade, produce associations, and, again, link architecture to theater: “Through this variety of aspect, an edifice becomes a kind of spectacle whose scenes seem to change, either because of the points from which they are viewed, or because of the changing play of light over the solids and voids throughout the day.” Architecture was now a mobile theater—“a series of animated nature”—a series of changing images or scenes either recorded by a mobile observer or generated by temporality, kinesthetic “effects” also to be found in Soane’s house-museum.

Soane must have been trying to capture some of the scenographic effects available in the spectacular entertainments of the city, albeit within the more limited visual technologies architecture offered. Undoubtedly affinities exist between the aerial or atmospheric effects of light, color, and shade employed by the diorama and Soane’s museum, particularly in their shared emphasis on ocularity and sensation and in their interest in transforming architectural form into romantic setting. The most successful of the dioramic scenes were (ruined) Gothic interiors (churches, sepulchers, abbeys) closely related to the “Gothicism” of Soane’s basement. The difference is one of medium. The scenes of Daguerre’s diorama were composed from flat, two-dimensional images (even if the lighting effects used three-dimensional space) and kept the audience at a distance. Soane’s museum, on the other hand, was composed within and as three-dimensional space and allowed its audience to move through it rather than limiting them to a passive reception of it. If the scenographic and illusionistic effects of Soane’s museum could not match that of the diorama or of de Loutherbourg’s theater, this spectatorial possibility, like the possibilities of the private special-effects parties held over the nineteenth century, went well beyond them.

Viewers of the diorama were increasingly immobile and ungrounded: attentive and absorbed subjects that were held, awed by the scenes before them. These observers had been freed from the codes that governed social interaction in the eighteenth century but had become no less codified and regularized; rather, they were increasingly normalized in relation to visual consumption. What the early nineteenth century witnessed was the beginnings of the process of “the rebuilding of an observer fitted for the tasks of ‘spectacular’ consumption.” But not all early nineteenth-century spectators remained suspended in a darkened space that denied their place by absorbing them in the scene before them. And William
Galperin notes the disruptive tendencies of the diorama’s early audiences, whose distractions served to undermine the absorptive, private order of the subjectivity constructed in the darkened auditorium.39

**Distractions**

Soane was interested in the “delirium produced by a blaze of effects” in a manner similar to Gothic cathedrals.40 This use of the term *delirium* links the house to the primary means by which both the panorama and the diorama were able, if only initially, to provide a resistance to the very normalizations or containments they promised: distraction. As Galperin notes, the panorama’s ability to fulfill a desire to “view things differently”—an expectation of surprise and startlement—was also linked to a desire for, and the generation of, distraction. Beyond the grasp of its visitors, the panorama was “marked by distraction, by an irresistible attention to details.” Transforming the beholder “into a detail among details,” it ensured an audience “caught between two conceptions of ‘reality’—between the overwhelming experience of seeing many things and the experience of a recoverable reality, in which ‘whole’-ness suggests a totality contained.”41 The diorama’s scenes, paired and intensively illusionistic, were “equally faithful to the central flux and the essential contingency of an always visible world.”42

Sharing characteristics with both “-oramas,” the most significant potential of Soane’s house is perhaps its ability to distract the spectator from the absorptive position eighteenth-century art demanded.43 A series of concatenated scenes—swarming with objects and details, effectively always shifting, and in many instances highly illusionistic—Soane’s house-museum was not just a spectacular theater but a space of *distraction*. Presenting an overwhelming experience that fractured coherency and order, it had the ability to destabilize the viewer. Distracted by the spectacle and by one another, visitors to such spaces were caught in a tension between hyperabsorption and a scattered attention: a state between concentration and a diversion or absentmindedness that was, as accounts of panoramas and dioramas from the period attest, consciously desired, one that paradoxically engendered an absorption in the very failure of absorption.

First explored by Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, and later taken up by Guy Debord, Jean Baudrillard, and others, distraction has been seen as a twentieth-century phenomenon, understood as both undermining subjecthood and potentially productive, engendering a new form of attention.44 But the nineteenth century had already seen shifts in attention, both made possible by emerging technologies and demanded by new audiences. The circulation and reception of imagery became so interrelated in the nineteenth century that distraction was a
constitutive characteristic of perception: “The meanings and effects of any single image are always adjacent to this overloaded and plural sensory environment and to the observer who inhabited it.”

This new observer was part of that sensory environment. Spectators at the panorama, for instance, were no longer in a privatized relation to the image (as they would have been before a painting, even in a public gallery) and not able to be absorbed. Instead, they found themselves “startled out of a commanding viewing position” by an overwhelming visual experience that in its incommensurability contested the subject’s control, and distracted by the irresistibility and multiplicity of details that eroded narrativistic or historical order. But it is also important to note that the distractive state of the viewer in Soane’s house-museum was inherently architectural. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility” Benjamin distinguished between an absorbed concentration (the demand of “art”) and a distracted attention (the form of attention by which architecture is perceived): in the former, the viewing subject is absorbed by the object; in the latter, the viewing subject absorbs the object. What we see in Benjamin’s model of the reception of architecture is not an absorbed or passive contemplation. But neither is it a form of inattention; it is instead a distracted concentration and a concentrated distraction, a mode of attention that requires an active engagement with the matrix of information flowing toward the viewing subject.

Within a “private” (that is, domestic) space, visitors to Soane’s house-museum were nonetheless returned to a visual field that was more “public,” one in which the “continuum between the world viewed and the world viewing it” ensured that as private subjects (spectators) they were simultaneously drawn into the series of objects on display. In this sense their private world was disrupted. For Galperin, “the capacity of sight was a prelude to the viewer’s sudden and even simultaneous visibility: a dislocation in which, in light of what one saw or was distracted by, one was inexorably relocated.” Unlike the mausoleum-as-theatrical-spectacle designed for Noel Desenfans, in which “the sense of mystery was maintained by a separation akin to that between auditorium and stage,” the visitor to Soane’s house-museum oscillated between glimpsing or viewing spaces and making an entrance into them. Like the diorama and panorama, Soane’s house-museum presented a breakdown in the safely legitimating relation between spectator and spectacle, effectively

theatricalizing the audience, reminding visitors of one another’s presence and of their mutual spectacularity.

Meanwhile, the representation of ruin (the themed conceits of Soane’s monkish fictions or the romanticized Gothic scenes of the diorama) in some respects precipitated the ruin of representation, “a resistance to the illusions ordinarily fostered by art”: “viewers were left suspended between an admiration of the illusion before them and a reluctance to accept as real or as authoritative what was, after all, only a representation.” Like the diorama, Soane’s house-museum “transfixed viewers with its ‘great illusion’ as Constable described it, only to lead them to a threshold where both representation and the subject-position controlling it (and controlled by it) were apparently rejected.” Space and image themselves were subjected to a kind of resistance. Limited to a material architecture and not able to rival the effects constructed in paint by his close friend, J.M.W. Turner, Soane’s commitment to an ambient atmospherics, to the dissolving properties of light and gloom, was explicit.

This is an important moment: the spectator is no longer the theatricalized participant of the eighteenth century nor yet the fully passive spectator of the later nineteenth, but a hybrid being oscillating between absorption and distraction, between passive reception and participation, between belief and disbelief. The public enjoyed these viewing experiences and positions. These spectacles, then, catered to and constructed an audience demanding new kinds of visual and sensational experiences rather than those of the preceding century.

Spectacular Theater
Jean Baudrillard has described the period of modernity up to our own as one characterized by a bifurcation between the public and private. The private sphere was for him the space of the “scene” and the “mirror”; the public sphere the space of “spectacle.” Baudrillard’s understanding of the public realm as spectacle is confirmed by the London of the early nineteenth century, a space swarming with scenes, spectacles, entertainments, and exhibitions. That the private sphere might become a space of “scenes” is borne out by the demands of cultivation and social status that made homes carefully contrived displays of taste and (increasingly) morality. That Soane would borrow from the spectacles of the world of public entertainment to create his own interior display simply pushed such trends to their limits.

Soane’s house-museum abounds with mirrors and scenes, but it also abounds with spectacles and with the staging of a subject addressed as much to a public sphere as it is to a private theater. Soane’s house-museum is a hybrid space, one...
both private and public, the boundaries separating those spheres in a process of dissolution. From the moment Soane made the decision to link his office to his house through a museological space, to the moment he made a gift of all its spaces, scenes, and spectacles to the public, it remained a hybrid being, one that could never be entirely private again, and conversely one that, as it became increasingly public (or dedicated to a public stage), could never be free of the private.

Soane’s house is not, however, just a collection of stage props. The effects that govern it—the production of a certain image, a staging, an atmosphere, certain qualities of light and shade, and so on—are more than form transformed into “scene.” They are the production of an imaginative and affective space. It is a focus on the play of personal response—“character” has become internalized, intimate, privatized, fantasmatic. It is not simply a building transformed into a stage but the staging of a building—an architectural theater and a theatrical architecture simultaneously. Soane’s house is thus not “adapted for spectacle and display,” as John Britton put it in 1827, but constructed from the beginning as an architecture of spectacle and display, a theater of effects. It is a mobile theater—a series of changing images or scenes recorded by a mobile observer.

Soane’s house-museum, as a house that was also constituted as a museum, took the domestic interior into the realms of a very different kind of interior: the spectacular or theatrical interior, a space exploiting special effects and a space constructing or engaging a particular kind of visitor. Constructed in a transitional moment between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this house-museum realigned definitions of theatricality central to the eighteenth toward a notion of spectatorship pivotal in the nineteenth. In step with a wider culture that ranged from the dramatic settings of Graveyard poetry and Gothic novels to the many spectacles that entertained London, it is part of the constellation of imagery, spectatorship, and spectactularity that characterized the early nineteenth-century milieu.
Notes


2. Hofland, 38–39; emphasis added.

3. This is due to the introduction of electric lighting and the extensive alterations to the basement by the late-Victorian curator James Wild. The present curators are currently restoring the basement and should return to it some of these lost effects.


5. The watercolor was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1815 and is now held in the RIBA Drawings Collection, Portman Square, London. If Soane’s knowledge of the Gandy watercolor (he was offered it in 1816) did not influence Soane’s desire to install the sarcophagus as he did, it must certainly have influenced the nighttime presentation of the sarcophagus in 1825, and it has the same color and quality as the alabaster must have had when lit from within.


8. Clérisseau’s depictions of Roman antiquity, especially those owned by Soane, tended to frame the ruins as stage-sets, the figures in the foreground as actors on a stage. Piranesi was first trained in stage design, and this early training brought important influences from baroque theater into his work that were in turn transmitted to Soane’s interpretation of neoclassicism. Piranesi worked with the Valeriani family of stage designers, and with the perspectivist Carlo Zucchi, and knew the work of the well-known stage designer Filippo Juvarra and the equally celebrated Bibiena family.

9. “In this way, the very essence of scenography can be seen to have become very much part of everyday life by the close of the century.” Christopher Baugh, Loutherbourg & Garrick, Theater in Focus series (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1990), 63–64. In schemes by Robert and James Adam and Soane himself, the main entrance to entertainment rooms in grand homes were occasionally framed by a columnated screen, set partway into the room, which effectively created a “stage” distinguishing those entering the room from those already within it.


12. See Gillian Darley, John Soane: An Accidental Romantic (New Haven: Yale University Press,
157. Soane led visitors to Pitzhanger on tours, and, although Lincoln's Inn Fields was a lesser social arena for grand entertaining, it was presented to guests in a similar way.


18. Sennett characterizes the nineteenth-century city in these terms. See Sennett, 125.


21. “I believe that every man of sensibility will be conscious of a variety of great and pleasing images passing with rapidity in his imagination, beyond what the scene or description before him can of themselves excite. They seem often, indeed, to have but a distant relation to the object that first excited them; and the object itself appears only to serve as a hint to awaken the imagination, and to lead it through every analogous thought that has place in the memory.” Archibald Alison, *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* (London: Ward, Lock and Co, 1879), 73–88. The first edition was published in 1790; Soane owned the 1811 edition.


23. Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 69. Crary sees the development of modern forms of attention arising out of crucial systemic shifts that occurred in the early nineteenth century and were well under way by the 1820s.

24. “Fancy . . . has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The fancy is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space; blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which are expressed by the word choice. But equally with the ordinary memory it must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.” Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (London: Rest Fenner, 1817), vol. 1, 296.


28. There were many other special-effects shows on offer in London during the period: magic lantern shows (developed at the end of the seventeenth century, popularized in the mid-1770s, and using light to project scenes painted on glass or actors hidden below stage as spectral holograms), peep shows (scenes contained inside captoptric boxes reflected in an internal mirror to give the illusion of perspectival depth), moving pictures and mechanical theaters (combinations of painted backdrops, automata and machines), scientific demonstrations (from private domestic demonstrations to full-scale theatrical performances), shows constructed as special effects machines (largely as “transformations,” scenes that appeared magically to change from one state to another through sophisticated visual and sound effects), and pleasure gardens (after dark, deploying techniques like lightshows, illusions such as the fireworks, sets and mechanics that reconstructed the eruption of Vesuvius, and transparencies or “transformations”).

29. Both shows were operated within a darkened room and exploited similar technology, using transparencies, screens, reflectors, colored slides and fabrics, lamps and shutters to unfold a series of moving and changing scenes that maximized the dramatic play of picturesque and sublime effects, including the tints, hues, and uncertain lighting of dawn and dusk or the gloom and drama of storms, fires, and nocturnal ruincapes. The Eidophusikon, opened by Jacques de Loutherbourg in 1781, concentrated techniques he had brought to Drury Lane from Jean-Nicolas Servandoni, the master illusionist of the Paris stage. It was enormously popular. Joshua Reynolds, for example, recommended it to his students, and Gainsborough went many times, inventing a shadow box based on it. Developed in Paris by Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, the diorama was imported to London in 1823. The revolving amphitheater successively lined up with each of two spectacles, set within top- and backlit tunnels.

30. The kaleidoscope was patented by David Brewster in 1817.


33. “A building by its composition expresses itself as on a stage that the scene is pastoral or tragic, that it is a temple or palace, a public building, or a private house.” Germain Boffrand, Livre d’architecture contenant les principes généraux de cet art (Paris: n.p., 1745), 16; quoted in Watkin, 197. Nicolas Le Camus de Mézières, in The Genius of Architecture; Or, the Analogy of That Art with Our Sensations, trans. David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Center, 1992), 71, linked his architecture of effect and sensation to the illusionistic spectacles of Servandoni.

34. See Etienne-Louis Boullée, Architecture, Essai sur l’art, trans. as “Architecture, Essay on Art,” in Helen Rosenau, Boullée and Visionary Architecture (London: Academy Editions, 1976), 106. Effect was so widespread as a central architectural principle that even for that stalwart of neoclassicism, William Chambers, architecture was required to have a “marked character,” a “forcible” or “full” effect, or even “many extraordinary effects.” Different effects could be created by situation or distance, and “particularly striking effects” could be produced through “the distribution of lighting” or “the disposal of mirrors” that Soane was to exploit in his house-museum. See William Chambers, A Treatise on the Decorative Part of Civil Architecture: illustrated by fifty original, and
three additional plates engraved by Old Rooker, Old Foundrinier, Charles Grignion, and other eminent hands (London: J. Smeaton, 1791, 3rd ed.).


36. The role of the diorama in the conditioning of a passive spectator is well documented. However, as William Galperin points out, the diorama in its early history was simultaneously able to offer a disruptive resistance to such normalization, as was the panorama. The distancing of viewers from the scene that excluded them from the space they inhabited is a characteristic of the diorama not shared by Soane’s house. See William Galperin, The Return of the Visible in British Romanticism (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1993).

37. Garrick staged two such parties in the 1770s (one at Lord Stanley’s estate and one at his own property), but perhaps the most famous were those held at Fonthill. The first Fonthill party, designed for Beckford’s twenty-first birthday by de Loutherbourg in 1781, employed hidden choral music, fragrant vapors, atmospheric lighting, and theatrical effects, much like the seductive architecture of sensation of Jean-François Bastide’s fictional house in La Petite Maison of 1758. As Beckford himself described it, de Loutherbourg created a “strange and necromantic light,” a “glowing haze” that conjured “a realm of Fairy, or rather, perhaps, a Demon Temple deep beneath the earth set apart for tremendous mysteries. . . . It was, in short, the realization of romance in its most extravagant intensity.” Quoted in Roger Lonsdale, “Introduction,” in William Beckford, Vathek (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), xi–xii. The second Fonthill party was the equally dramatic presentation of Beckford’s new abbey, then under construction, to honor the visit of Lord Nelson and the Hamiltons in 1800. The party was stage-managed “to steal upon the senses, to dazzle the eye, and to bewilder the fancy.” John Britton, Graphical and Literary Illustrations of Fonthill Abbey, Wiltshire; with heraldical and genealogical notices of the Beckford family (London, n.p., 1823), 29.


42. Galperin, 66.

43. For an elaboration of the absorptive position demanded by the artwork (specifically painting) in the eighteenth century, see Michael Fried’s Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). As the title suggests, theatricality is an important part of this spectatorial position and hence of relevance here.


46. See Galperin, 42–54.

47. See Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 239–241; and Vidler, “Dead End Street.” Benjamin is contrasting two kinds of absorption: a concentrated attention (to be absorbed by a work) and a distracted attention (to absorb something, in an absentminded way).

48. Galperin, 42.

49. Howard Colvin, *Architecture and the After-Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 360. The first mausoleum was built at the back of Desenfans’s house in Charlotte Street and the second, for his heir Francis Bourgeois, was constructed as part of the Dulwich Picture Gallery. In both schemes the visitor entered a darkened circular ante-chamber (the “auditorium”) that led through an arched opening into a raised top-lit tomb-chamber reminiscent of Gandy’s sepulchral vision.


52. See Baudrillard, “The Ecstasy of Communication,” 126. The period following on from the 1980s for him signals a paradigm shift away from this model.

53. Britton, 44.