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I N T E R V I E W  
W I T H

Dr. Alberto  
Perez-Gomez

by Tony Barake

*Dans cette interview le docteur Perez-Gomez discute du symbolisme et de son lien avec l'architecture.*

**The Fifth Column:** In your book Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science, you write of science and of the scientific attitude causing a crisis in architecture. Am I misinterpreting you?

**Alberto Perez-Gomez:** What the title of the book refers to is a crisis in science itself, and in the expectations which we have of science, not so much that one is the cause of the other. Yes, one can speak of the crisis of values, of our ecological or economic crisis, but that is not really what the title of the book implies. I even had a different title for the book in mind.

**TFC:** What did you have in mind ?

**PG:** Oh, something about geometry and architecture, a lot more humble in a way. While the title of the introduction was "Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science", MIT press suggested it as the title of the whole book. It is certainly the source of my whole historical position which in turn comes from Husserl, perhaps the father of continental European philosophy. Whether you look at structuralism or, even later, continental post-structuralism or existentialism, all of the well known authors owe him a lot. The title is really a paraphrase of Husserl, and what he means is that somehow the world of our experience can no longer be accounted for by scientific systems; that something happened in the beginning of the 19th century that made science truly autonomous, so that there is a link which is broken between the universes of discourse, or the syntactic systems of the different sciences and the world of our experience.

**TFC:** Was that break perhaps due to the ever increasing demands of the empires of the western world of the 19th century, where the need for specialization became necessary to take advantage of the fast growth of technology?

**PG:** This business of specialization is one of the causes, but I would not go so far as to say that it caused the crisis. You see, that is where Husserl gets very interesting. He doesn't reduce this whole problem to material forces. It is easy to see the material forces. These are the kinds of things that Peter Collins talks about. What Husserl is saying is that there is a mental dimension to all of this, an intellectual dimension, that the origins of this transformation are not that recent, that they go back to Plato. What happens in the early 19th century is that intellectual tools are developed which allow for this arrogant control and domination of the world finally to take place, tools that in fact did not exist before. That is why I am so interested for example in the geometries, in this change from Euclidean geometries first, to descriptive and projective geometries and finally to non-Euclidean geometries. Because there, Husserl points out, that the



ground of intuition finally disappears. It is very clear if you read Ortega or Husserl, that without intuition, without the idea as image it is impossible to do anything in Euclidean geometry.

**TFC:** You are talking about the distancing from the world?

**PG:** Yes, the geometry is really "of the world". And you need to acknowledge that the point of departure of geometry is intuition, and, therefore, it is not precise. It is really part of the primordial, ever-changing realm of human existence.

**TFC:** If Plato started this distancing, where ideas became entities, were things more unified before Plato in your opinion?

**PG:** Yes, you could put it that way in reference to pre-Classical Greek or mythical cultures. And Plato himself, mind you, was very obsessed with the notion that ideas inhabit the world, the world of experience. This is not as simple as it seems. What has in fact happened in modern science is what one could call a perversion of Plato. Plato's own writings are still deployed in the universe of myth. So the roots of modern science are there, but there is a perversion in this inversion of priorities where certain mathematicians would still believe that numbers are more real than the stuff of the world.

**TFC:** Yes, granted, but as late as the 19th century, when physicists were saying that there was nothing left to discover, they still believed in the Ether, they still believed that light travelled through some medium, it was intuitively impossible to think of emptiness. When did this total abstraction you talk about occur?

**PG:** Well I'm not sure. It's a question of where you draw the line. I do believe that the big break has something to do with the industrial revolution. These tools that I'm describing, particularly descriptive and projective geometries, have a lot to do with it. I mean projective geometries already allow you to do geometry with algebra.

**TFC:** This distance is necessary to maintain the world as it is. The world has become so complex that to deal with it in a more holistic way would require vulgarization. The specialization is a phenomenon related to the sheer quantity of information to be dealt with.

**PG:** This is only so if you insist on assigning to science the only legitimate "knowledge" of the world. In art and poetry, you can (and must) deal with the whole. What appears to have happened in the beginning of the 19th century is that philosophy becomes also specialized so that all the questions that concern the human being as a person, which were previously integrated into the endeavors of science, become separated. Furthermore, you have to realize that a clear differentiation between cosmology and history. The problem can be taken back to the Greek times as the first kind of initial break, but if you look at the history of Western culture, there is always a coherence between history and cosmology. In the Renaissance, for example, looking at the writings of Alberti, he substantiates through stories, through history, the cosmological outlook. There is no break and this appears to us terribly artificial. As far as he is concerned, the whole realm which is external to the human being is quite homogeneous and consistent.

In the 18th century, the break starts to become really apparent with the work of Vico particularly. He makes the distinction between history as the normative science and Galileo's, Descartes', and Newton's position, which is of course much more dominant in Europe. Somehow the



natural sciences, particularly astronomy and then physics, become the normative sciences. This model will then be extrapolated to biology, psychology sociology and the rest. Only the arts, and particularly literature, inherit thereafter the ontological aspirations of traditional knowledge.

**TFC:** Why that tendency to give the natural sciences so much authority?

**PG:** This is of course a very complex problem. But I think one of the issues is, first of all, an obsession for the invariant. This is, of course, very human because the invariant is given in experience and we always have a tendency to fall in love with it simply because we are mortals. At another level, it has to do with the technical interest. The fact is that if you don't make it happen, the scientific "assumptions" about the world of everyday life are impossible to believe. You know Galileo's experiments are completely in his mind. When he talks about inertia, about bodies that don't change when they move, the concept that motion is a "state", is a weird notion if you think of our experience. So in order to make this believable you have to make it happen. And thus, with this mentality of modern science, emerges a technical interest which implies increasing domination, increasing control of the physical reality of man.

**TFC:** But what about Aristotle with his thought experiments? He seems to have been the final authority for people of the Middle Ages. Why all of a sudden this need for making it happen with machines, with objects ?

**PG:** While Aristotle is interested in categories, he is always very concerned with being close to experience, being very respectful of the stuff of the world as given. He is troubled by this very much. In this he is very different from Plato. Plato is much more impatient. And really as far as the two philosophers are concerned in their own time, that is the difference. It is one of patience versus impatience. Because Plato himself would struggle with this notion that even the supreme idea is given in the world of experience.

**TFC:** Yet, both have intuition in common. At some point this intuition is questioned. The questioning of intuition comes with the miracles of modern science, the new machines etc... it works...

**PG:** It works; well that is what makes it so powerful. We are also giving up a lot. This is similar to the fascination with the invariable. One could say that in the original human condition, even in mythical times, there is this desire to control, and that is of course associated with magic. This magic, which has something to do with man's problem of dwelling, makes man different from the animal: the animal adapts itself to the environment, is in a sense part of the environment, whereas man really has this problem, he is always finding himself "against" the environment. This existential, fundamental condition of human beings, is, therefore, from the very beginning, nurtured by the necessity of magic. But also from the beginning, you have white and black magic. You have white magic, a reconciliatory kind of magic, which becomes religion. It respects the world as given and tries to deal with these inadequacies. There is also, however, the other kind of magic, black magic, with which man asserts his individuality and tries to dominate. It's very clear that technology supports the aspirations of this black magic which, in turn, becomes indispensable for the science to be proven. So one thing feeds on the other, gets perpetuated.

You have to remember that this fascination with the whole process is really a 19th century phenomenon. Even in the 18th century people would



be terribly afraid of thunder, for example. These things we take for granted, but it is actually quite recent that people become so obsessed with technology and that technology becomes like second nature.

**TFC:** The beginning of the Modern movement in architecture with its obsession with the new materials and the creation of new form, that kind of mentality is a reflection of this power. Let's deny the ancients, let's create a new classicism, let create a new order. How and why does this lead to problems in architecture?

**PG:** Heidegger talks about this problem in his essay on technology. He sees the problem of technology as not just machines, but as the problem of giving the means more importance than the ends, so that the whole process of human life becomes one of efficiency. Even the values of hedonism - maximum pleasure and minimum pain - are technology in action. It is a whole mentality that is deeper than our political ideologies and conditions of our "modern" experience. But, Heidegger clearly states that we cannot be nostalgic about this, and he tries to formulate a positive attitude: we have to take an outlook which releases us towards *things* which are *not* the objects of science. First of all, we have to relearn how to perceive, how to see, and that the *thing* is always more than any theory of science would allow us to conceive of it. The contemporary arts have been very concerned with the issue of what *is* the thing. So there is certain hope there.

Breton talks about this concern in his little article on the crisis of the object. He says, no matter how much we dissect, take apart or theorize, about water, for instance, water will always be more in our experience. That is the ground: our embodied perception of water. That is where meaning is ultimately given. This is much more crucial than any reduction, linguistic or mathematical, or of any order which we may disclose. That is one aspect of Heidegger's statement. If you accept it and follow it through, the whole problem is one of learning how to perceive and how to bracket all of our scientific prejudices. That is one way: a renewed awareness of knowledge through perception as elucidated by phenomenology.

The other aspect of Heidegger's statement is his request for an openness to mysteries. Those are his words. This means essentially coming to terms with the fact that no matter how complex the world seems, at some point in time this reconciliation of personal experience with the universe of thought is necessary for us to make sense, as human beings, of what we do in the world. You can keep on postponing it, and that is in fact what Husserl calls the crisis.

Today we seem to be able to keep on postponing it. We don't know how far we can go. Human nature is extremely fragile, yet extremely resilient. You have these stories about people going crazy in captivity for two days and scientists or writers that can spend forty years in captivity, inventing whole worlds in their minds. So this is the problem. We don't know how far we can go, but we must realize that this openness to mystery is a condition of humanity, of coherence of human nature. It is a question of personal reconciliation. It is also a question of bringing back the traditional concerns of philosophy in a transformed way (because it is not even possible to bring them back as metaphysics or anything like that; that's finished). We must bring them back into what we do and how we articulate what we do as architects.



**TFC:** Yes, but the made world is what I was talking about in terms of the complexity... we've made a world that is so complex that becomes difficult to deal with.

You are talking about the distance between the symbol and the experience, since it is impossible to really describe completely what is around us. Experience is there, but the descriptions will always be faulty. They may be language, pictures, whatever. Now architecture, being something one thinks of, or designs, and then makes so that it can be experienced, makes that bridge between the symbol and reality. So my question is: since we have this technology around us, and since it is something that we've made, is it not natural to want to glorify it and put it in our architecture?

**TFC:** So if I understand you, the symbol is what occurs when we link the syntax and the semantics. Does that not constantly change depending on the context?

**PG:** Symbol is not a secondary order of reality. Symbol, if you are going to understand it from a phenomenological perspective, is what makes our embodied engagement in the world human in the first place; that is, what differentiates human perception from animal perception. Now let me try to give you a simple example that comes from Merleau-Ponty's Structure of Behaviour. He meditates upon an experiment that Koffka, a well known psychologist, did with apes. The animals are capable of taking a branch and using it as a tool to obtain a banana placed high in their cage, for example. What happens in the world of the animal is that the branch has actually stopped being a branch to become a tool allowing the hungry animal to get his fruit. This looks similar to what a human being would do, but the fundamental difference is that for the human being, the branch doesn't stop being a branch when you use it as a tool. The thing is open. It has an openness, so that in the way the world is given to us, there is always an openness, something Merleau-Ponty calls the invisible dimension of human experience. The visible is given while the invisible is that dimension which is always open and can never be closed. It is never a one-to-one relationship.

That is the quarrel that phenomenology has with semiology. It is not that sign and signifier don't exist, it's the problem of the one-to-one relationship, which is an obsession today, say at the popular level in terms of talking about meaning, but which is really a perversion of the very nature of human experience, where you don't really have to think about it. The world is given with that openness. Then taking this one step further, it could be stated that the world is given symbolically. The symbol is of the world. An example: the pair of compasses placed in a coat of arms in the main square of Brussels is a symbol for the guild of the Masons, right? The compass is not only a compass; it is a whole world, a whole world that is not only the whole world of work of the mason, but that is the world of tribute to God, and building the city of God, and the reconciliation it entails. It's really a whole universe that is embodied in the very real compass. So there is nothing arcane or unreal about the symbol. The symbol is of the world but it allows man to effectively belong to a reality that is greater than the specificity of the symbol and to transcend the present. That is one of the fundamental issues of symbolization, both in art and in architecture. That is the whole point. You are not condemned to the individual present, to your mortality, but you can aspire to belong to something and obviously larger.

**PG:** Yes, that's part of its mystery you see. It changes constantly and you are right in saying that this aspect is one of the problems today, in a world obsessed with syntax. What can we do as architects if we are concerned with symbol and with semantics? This is a very real problem. On the other hand, if you understand how we actually perceive the world, the nature of human perception, and if you understand that at its very root it is symbolic, then there is always hope, because things are always more than these reductions.



**TFC:** Yes, but we are in a time when symbols are changing very quickly and architecture, being something that hopefully lasts, is put in a tenuous position by this view.

**TFC:** So in the architectural research that you are doing, and others like Hejduk are doing, do you see it as a generator which can lead us to built architecture, or do you see it as standing by itself? Do you see building as something feasible, or have you separated building and architecture at this point?

**TFC:** Coming back to architectural research... another common approach is to go back to precedent, and from it develop architecture. Now in that sense, there is also the notion of history, because a precedent is the link to the past. This is often not a generation of new ideas but a taking of old ideas and trying to move them forward. Do you see any hope in that kind of approach?

**PG:** Yes, I wouldn't disagree with you. This has led to my concern about theoretical projects which you probably know about, projects rooted in a poetic normative. These represent a privileged vehicle to maintain in architecture the importance of symbolization as a cultural dimension. I think that if we don't acknowledge that this is our only way of dealing with the mystery, then we are condemned to nonsense; we are really condemned to being totally disoriented. So that is the alternative.

**PG:** No, I have not separated it completely at this point. I could also understand "building" in its traditional sense and emphasize the opposite: that a condition for architecture is that it could be *constructed* in the same way, by the architect's *own* hands. In the sense of conventional practice, I do believe that it is particularly difficult to "build" architecture in the industrialized world, and that it's probably harder than it ever was before. But that doesn't mean that it is not absolutely crucial to try to do it. I guess I am less worried with this problem because I do perceive that the historical reality of architecture has always shifted. You know, for example, that there is a lot of ephemeral architecture that we don't even have access to, canvas and wood architecture which was in its own time absolutely crucial. It may well be that architectural intentions (which I would describe as this symbolic ordering, the actual taking measure of the world rather than appearance) may be that inhabiting some other realms, like film, painting... things that we would call by other names. Perhaps this is really the condition of the modern world, that architecture is very seldom embodied in the realm of, as you might say, permanent "buildings".

**PG:** If you take the precedent of a Renaissance villa, or whatever, that is only the residue of something, that is not the architecture. It is just like a shadow, a footprint. The historical phenomenon is more complex than that, and I would claim that the problem with that approach is that one is objectifying or cannibalizing history. Dealing with history demands that you respect it for what it is, for how it reveals the mystery in its own time. You don't destroy it, classify it or tear it apart. You actually understand what it means in its own time. That is why I am fascinated with history, because it is really *all* we have.

By the same token, you have to understand that you cannot take history at face value. You really have to understand its value, what Ricoeur calls "the world of the work", in order to be able to come to understand our world, and hopefully go from there. You would then come to a self-understanding by being open to the world of work. That is the issue, that you don't cut, objectify, or transform, things that already exist. I certainly believe that you need history to put forward a coherent story of your own, to come to terms with the problem of here and now, because that is all we have. But scientific distortions are very dangerous. You have to understand that attitudes like a concern for typology and precedent are often obsessed with that which is invariable, whereas, in fact, what is constant is the change itself. So rather than this obsession with the invariable, we have to realize that we are indeed in a different world, and



what we learn from that work is how it reveals a certain mystery in its own time, how it symbolizes in its own time for our present.

**TFC:** This reinterpretation, can it not occur simply by building? For example, the PoMo architects that are, as you say, cannibalizing history by taking pediments and putting them over doors, in a way they may be mediating, taking the modern technique and mediating them with the forms of history. Just by building, the meaning comes out of the act, comes out of doing what they are doing. I'm also taking an extreme position to bring out the point. I'm basically asking whether it is necessary to be so introspective about this issue. We can't build anything other than what we can.

**PG:** You put it very well, yes. It is like a circle, but my straight answer would be yes. It is very important that one is conscious because one has to articulate in words what one makes, and that is ultimately what matters; that is ultimately all you know as a human being. Having said that, I must insist that I understand very well that given the limitations set by technology, developers, fashion, window details, economics and all that stuff, what you end up building is very easily dateable. However, I still believe that the intention is crucial, because that is all that one can really speak about. The rest is part of the order of history. You are submerged and born into it. But somehow, if you look at the historical tradition of our 2000 years of architectural history, there is clear evidence, I believe, that this consciousness means something. The architects that have been conscious of their place and time, and have managed, in fact, to articulate it in words or in explicit or implicit theoretical positions, are certainly aware. The architects that are "aware" of their time and place are the significant players that eventually become the leaders and makers of our "tradition". Those are the real architects in a sense. So if we are concerned today with architecture and with the dilemma that is ours, one has to somehow look at this and believe that however difficult it may be to accept that thinking and doing are intimately connected, however difficult that is from our objectivistic point of view, regardless of how much we know, and regardless of the limitations upon what we can build, the coherence of real theory and practice will make a difference. If we are going to save architecture and reconnect it to "practice", if we are concerned at all with somehow making buildings, large rather than small constructions that embody that symbolic intentionality, the problem of self-understanding or establishing a critical distance between what we do and the world becomes an important question.

So, again, the short answer to your question would be yes. It does make a difference. Particularly from the point of view of our scientific understanding of perception. This is difficult to accept because we readily and uncritically accept that somehow we are like machines, that our hands do something and our thoughts do something else. I am convinced that a mental acknowledgement of the situation would go a long way toward change. That is what happened in history, whether we believe it or not. The mind and the ideas have played a fundamental role in changes, they have not just been material changes. It is always a question of mentality not only of materiality.

**TFC:** Concerning your point about form and meaning, have we not opened a Pandora's box by discovering this whole notion of syntax and semantics? Is it not an arbitrary division of our perception? Must one not suspend language when one does architecture?

**PG:** Ricoeur says: there is no symbolization before man speaks, and, therefore, that has something to do with our fundamental perception of constancy in the world, which of course is very close to the world in, say, printed languages. You know the examples that linguists use about, say, primitive tribes: Bedouins that have 30 words for camel, or Lapps that have 6 or 7 words for white, and similarly Inuits with snow. Those languages are still very close to the experience. But it is already a naming, that is what Ricoeur is saying, that somehow one cannot imagine man without language; that is the primary evidence of our perception of the



invariant. By the same token, language is rooted much deeper and Ricoeur is arguing against Wittgenstein, and others who follow him, who would claim that languages are ultimately arbitrary codes, and that all we can have access to are the rules of games. Even lately, post-structuralists tend to follow this idea.

So going to your question, I don't think it is an issue of suspending language when one does architecture, by no means. It's a question of recovering the poetic dimension of language. This is the way Heidegger would say it. Heidegger would claim that man is first a poet and he first speaks poetically. Only later does the word become truly one-to-one with the experience. So it becomes stable and the ground of language which we call prose, we try to refer to the same reality when we speak rather than discover some other modes of reality. I suppose that poetic language would once again take upon itself the task of naming, of articulating what we wish to do as architects, in a realm which is as immediate as possible to the experience. This is why Hejduk is very interested in poetry. I suppose even Ledoux tries to write poetically rather than write scientific prose, as all the people that preceded him did. Those who wrote before Ledoux or Boullée were very interested in a scientific precision of language. They would use a similar language as Newton, for example, to talk about architecture. There was no schism there. But once the schism is acknowledged, then the way in which these architects deal with the problem is to emphatically reject prose in favor of poetry.

**TFC:** So you are saying that language can be seen as a common ground which can be used in two ways, figuratively, relating to the senses, and as poetry. But as poetry, it becomes non-figurative, as architecture is non-figurative ?

**PG:** Well there is that dimension, but I would make the difference by saying that, in prose, what is important is the stability, the invariant. The more stable the better; the ideal language would be a kind of mathematical code. This is why modern scientists distrust language. If you have heard modern scientists talk about scientific methodology, they always say, "beware of language".

**TFC:** But mathematics is only stable because it is internally stable; it is self-referential. And the poetry of mathematics is inherent in the syntax.

**PG:** This is what structuralists would claim.

**TFC:** Do you disagree with this position?

**PG:** I would disagree with that because I think there is no poetry without semantics.

**TFC:** So form by itself, without intention, is empty? Semantics is the intention.

**PG:** Yes. I don't think it is possible to reduce poetry to syntax. In poetry, there is not a direct relationship with the experience but a metaphoric, oblique one which, in fact, reveals and conceals - reveals the truth of the experience by concealing it. It brings about the mystery of the experience. I think that is what art does. Art is always putting forward the mystery that Heidegger speaks about.



**TFC:** But in a way, art seems sometimes to be a conscious suspension of that prose aspect of our thinking. What I was asking, using the example of mathematics and language in general, was: Is not syntax, in itself, an expression of our unconscious intentions? Is not the way we have learned to think syntactic? Most mathematicians will tell you that mathematics is beautiful because it expresses something of their being by its structure, because mathematics is their thinking. Therefore, maybe to make that rift, syntax/semantics, is a way of dealing with issues, while really they are one and the same thing, or aspects of the same thing, of perception.

**TFC:** This is why Gödel is important in your essay in Carleton Book ("Abstraction in Modern Architecture"), because he proved that you have to step outside the system to understand it.

**TFC:** But after Gödel, mathematicians resolved the crisis by saying, 'well, there are many mathematics'.

**TFC:** Mathematics became formalism?.

**PG:** You are formulating the most crucial debate going on presently in philosophy and linguistics. Of course, we all know that literature is a world of its own, a world of words that indeed suspends the "prose" aspect of thought in order to say the other. The issue, however, is always *mimesis* and representation, of that which ultimately cannot be reduced to concepts/words. The only way to accept that meaning is in syntax is by stating that the ground of experience is inaccessible, so that Truth is ultimately inaccessible.

**PG:** Yes, for me Gödel's proof is a clear sign of how in mathematics, very clear systems like those, it is not possible to stay within the system. To me Gödel's proof is still a way to look at post-structuralism critically.

**PG:** And all you can do is learn the rules and operate within them.

**PG:** This is vaguely the post-structuralist position, particularly coming from Wittgenstein. But the issue that Gödel was dealing with is far more profound than that. What Gödel's proof is all about is the impossibility of operating meaningfully without acknowledging the ground. There are many mathematics, but there is only one ground, even if one only catches a glimpse of it before dying.



**TFC:** In that same Carleton Book essay, you approve of "the personalization of values, leading to anything goes, as long as it is generated by a genuine discovery of order as a form of self knowledge." You seem to be supporting the idea of structuralism by using the word order. What I'm questioning then is, if the order is personal, where does it link into symbol? The symbol can be personal, but since it is architecture, it has to deal with other people. How do you resolve personal versus general ?

**TFC:** So the building becomes very linked to the architect.

**TFC:** So where is that common ground? Is it language?

**TFC:** Is that ground constant, since it is given in perception, constant in time, going from the past to today?

**PG:** The answer is through the story, the personal story, your theory, your articulation, your understanding which ultimately must come from your own personal understanding of history, what the discipline has been. And this, remember, is the world of the work.

**PG:** Yes, that is true, but on the other hand, one has to admit that the nature of symbolization in art is that it always points away from the author. It is a circle that starts with the author. Let's look at an example from history, like Suger or Alberti. It starts with a person, it necessitates a person's understanding and vision, but then the work itself points away from the author as it is realized. The nature of the work is of the world rather than of the author. Artists will tell you this, that what they make, immediately, the moment they make it, is no longer theirs. That is really the difference between a poem that one writes when one is sixteen and a real poem. The former is about oneself, the real poem is not about the author.

**PG:** No, I think it is the body, and its articulation in the world. Language has a lot to do with it; nothing is given in human experience without it. There is another sphere that Merleau-Ponty talks about, however, the pre-reflective one, which is not secondary, but basic (as he claims quite convincingly) upon which all other "universes" of science, art, dreams, etc., are built. He explains that this is the motor, intentionality, having to do with time. The "motility", the motor engagement of the human body in the world, he believes, is the ground upon which these meanings are constituted; therefore, this is the ground that ultimately makes symbolization possible.

**PG:** It has certain dimensions which are constant and others which are not. For example, the world of, say, an African tribesman versus that of a Western urban man: the tribesman will run and hunt better and faster than the Western man. So obviously the world in which the bodies are engaged shifts and, therefore, the ground shifts. But, yes, there is constancy, so if we can be touched by something like a Gothic cathedral without knowing much about Christianity, it is precisely because of this reason. It is rather funny; on one level it seems obvious while, on another, scientists impose structures on all these things, and the emphasis on linguistics or syntax leads to a complete disregard of embodiment as the ground of meaning.



**TFC:** But there are layers of meaning and of semantics. In this passage, when you are talking about personalization, you are no longer talking about this common basic layer. This personalization is very much linked with the author, is it not? How does that separation from the author occur?

**TFC:** How does that personalization differ from the eclecticism which was occurring in the 19th century where each architect took things he liked and put them on buildings?

**PG:** (pause) ...I am quite worried about this article myself. It talks about gnosticism, and that has to be qualified first since it has a lot to do with modern technology, and its worst evil: the inability to acknowledge that there is anything in the world that has value, and that all can be changed, thus leading man to take the task of salvation as a personal task. Gnosticism also has a positive dimension where the artist also assumes the task of salvation, but through reconciliation. That is what I mean in the Carleton Book article. So the personalization is an attempt to transcend "common sense". Critical distance is what I am referring to. It is that you cannot really go and accept what you are told; you have to establish a distance and make up your mind. And start from there, really to believe that it is your perception and your life and that you have to be responsible for it. And that anything you make in the world ultimately hinges upon that. As you say this is very problematic. The way to self-understanding is always through history and the world of the works. This is what saves my position from falling back to a Cartesian subjectivism. Furthermore, it is obvious that freedom is never absolute. An archeologist from the future would easily date the present even if the artefact he found represented the artist's wildest fantasy. I still believe that if you look at the tradition of contributed by architectural history, this personal taking of responsibility, understanding the world, and "making", from that premise rather than from what is "said", particularly today's common sense of technology, will make a great difference. So if you take our present situation for granted, obviously what you do is not going to make any sense, you cannot take it for granted, and I think that is the issue.

**PG:** The eclecticism of the 19th century depends on a scientific vision of history which is in fact very much like post-modernism, where you take stable systems, such as styles and use them in the present. Ascribe to them some meaning, like Pugin did, and then make Gothic in England. That is not really what I am talking about. This personalization is really an attempt to recover the ground rather than a glorification of relativism. It has the danger of leading to anything goes, particularly as a pedagogical premise. I would rather accept that danger, face on, while also understanding that through that personal critique, there is a way out, rather than "eluding" the danger by not trying. I reject any position that pretends to take the legitimacy away from this view of the world, which is what modern science tries to do, as do very many schools of architecture. We are going to tell you how, and this is how, and you are going to do it that way. So what I am saying, is that even though there is a danger of "anything goes", I would rather accept that danger, while realizing that the only way out of the dilemma is through this personal understanding, through history/theory. Thus concerning your question, there is clearly no connection between one and the other. Nineteenth century eclecticism is really a scientific attempt to deal with the problem of meaning in terms of style. And, in fact, if you look at it very carefully, in the 19th century itself, it is not just that you build in any style possible. These people were very serious about which was truly the best style, the truly meaningful style. In 1824, there was a meeting in Germany asking in which style should we build. So it is very serious; Semper, Ruskin, Pugin were very serious. The problem was the scientific reduction of architecture, first, to form then to syntax, that is style, and the assumption that somehow



syntax held the meaning. But the concern was genuine in a way. So if you understand that, I would say that the same genuine concern is the one that relates to that first statement. Except today, we cannot first accept that scientific reduction of meaning to form and style. That, in itself, would be the main difference.

**TFC:** This seems to lead to the idea of authorship, as something which a style does not have. A style is something which you belong to. If you take a personal point of view, you become the author, and everything is "seen" through the filter of your perception.

**TFC:** So we can talk of symbol as a common thing, not symbol as a personal thing? Can you reconcile both?

**TFC:** Why does it become so much more personal in modern times? In the Renaissance, there seems to have been more of a consensus of the symbol, whereas now it is fragmented. Is there not the danger that it can fragment to the point where every individual sees something different and then the order is lost? What happens when we get to the point of fragmentation of symbol, where it becomes a question of my perception versus your perception? Can we still talk of symbols today?

**PG:** Yes even though the author becomes very important, there is always the disappearance of the author behind the work. This is the circle I was talking about earlier. In any true work of art, the work becomes of the world. This is constant throughout history. And the world has shifted; it has been pagan, Christian, modern, but art is always of the world rather than of the person. So that is one level. The other level is how culture perceives the architect, which is the notion of authorship. It emerges in the Renaissance, when the architect himself is perceived as being of greater importance. The act of creation, the making of the work of art obeys this profound rule, and the author disappears.

**PG:** It really operates when it addresses that ground. I will give you an example, a difficult one because it is very close to us. I am talking about John Hejduk's work. His work is very personal, but as far as I am concerned, it is very much of the world; it is about technology, our dreams, our fears as modern men. So, in that sense, it is very much of the world. We can perhaps debate this. Some people may not agree with me. You look at the work and you tend to say that this is not absolute. But that is the way that I would explain it. He is very close to us in time and he really addresses problems that are very much our own. Therefore, the work is personal but belongs to the world.

**PG:** Only insofar as we share a world and share a body, insofar as language is ultimately translatable. It gets very basic, and that is the problem because all the other structures which we are conscious of, all the mental structures, are not part of a whole cosmology anymore.



**TFC:** Back to structuralism again then...

**PG:** What is common is that we share all these structures, and different languages, but ultimately they all miss it. That means that there is an opening there for something that doesn't miss it, which is again symbolization, and deals with this very primary question of embodiment, gesture... it becomes quite basic. But I think this opening does remain because we are still human beings, and we still have to acknowledge that there is a mystery in the way in which we operate in everyday life. We may not want to see it, but it is there and as long as it is there that little opening for true symbolization and true art will prevail. What makes this very complicated is that many artists and architects, even those concerned with aesthetics have fallen into the trap of structuralism, and have taken this to be simply deconstructions and developments of syntactic models. They flood the world with junk that usually is not particularly interesting. By the same token, there are things around this planet that are absolutely different, qualitatively different, that speak about things that are more profound, that are not just about the syntax. They are things that we do share.

**TFC:** So that perception of quality really is the key?

**PG:** Perception is really the key to this whole dilemma. Because we take so much for granted as to how the world is given to us. Ask your colleagues, 'how do we perceive?'. I'm sure that many of them will tell you that it has something to do with sensations that come to my senses and come to my brain, and somehow their meaning appears. This is the problem, because perception is what architecture is all about, and we have to unthink these preconceptions we have about it. Merlau-Ponty wrote that when what one says about perception is more interesting than perception itself, something is wrong with culture. Unfortunately, whether we like it or not, we are not past this state of affairs.

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