

MODERN DITHYRAMB

A Silent Explosion

As predicted by Nietzsche, modern society experienced a painful disenchantment at the breakdown of its referential system, a system based on the *Logos* and on a Humanism ultimately derived from Christianity. But this loss of reference is only a symptom of the catastrophe, of the silent explosion that blasted an invisible centre into several fragments. The unifying centre, invisible, as it was in a sense 'spiritual'; it was powerful because it constituted a totality. The fragments, moments, claimed their autonomy, each of them trying to dominate. Every piece is as mortal as its creators, having its own potency and special claim to authority: religion (as demonstrated by Feuerbach); the power of the economy (Smith and Ricardo); the power of politics and the state (from Hegel to Stalin); the power of science; the power of technology; of craftsmanship; of discourse; of libido; of the mystical and so on. Each of these moments, to follow the argument of Hegel, lays claim to the absolute.

While at first glance, this fragmentation might be seen as a positive generator, it hides within itself a complex paradox. Indeed, this fragmentation contains within itself a homogenization; a tendency towards sameness, equivalence, repetition. Stereotyped representation, linear time, (the measured homogeneous time represented by the clock), everyday life 'management', bureaucracy, and so on, are factors that constitute homogeneity. These historical factors have been interconnected with an ever increasingly hierarchical organization: hierarchy of function, of incomes, of the instant, of fields of knowledge.

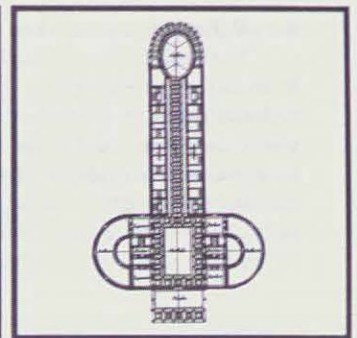
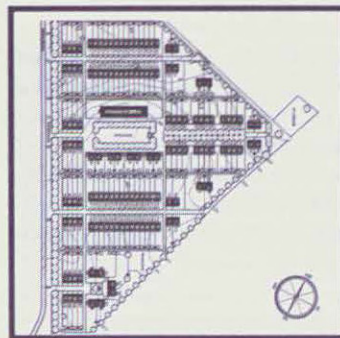
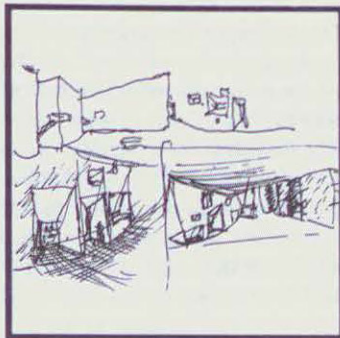
This paradoxical situation can be better understood with a closer look at a particular case; everyday life 'management'. The aggressively marketed products of the computer industry confirm and account for the trend: "*manage your everyday life like a small firm!*", "*work out a budget and classify your recipes!*" As such, this trend contributes a factor of homogeneity, though arising out of the fragmentation of knowledge. Here then is an example of the movement towards dominance by one of the pieces left after the explosion, the authoritative science of the economists. Smith, Ricardo and Taylor still exercise an oppressive authority. Both fragmentation and homogeneity have

resulted in a hierarchical organization of everyday life functions; a tendency which is inherent to any kind of rational management. Indeed one has to prioritize in order to be economically efficient.

Instrumentality

Although conducted under the label of instrumentality, the historical debate between Karl Teige and Le Corbusier, was related to political position and ideologies.¹ The leftist political allegiances explicit in Teige's text are less so in Le Corbusier's. In his response to Teige in "In Defense of Architecture", Le Corbusier attempts to transcend the debate. By eschewing the word 'monumentality', he suggests that perhaps the debate departs from reality, that the dispute has lost its connection to the essential problem.

The generations after Teige and Le Corbusier continued the debate, with apparent issue of the conflict remaining instrumentality versus monumentality: Lewis Mumford and Buckminster Fuller on one side; Henry Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson on the other. The post-modern architecture of the late seventies and early eighties displayed, on the surface, a return to monumentality; a neo-monumentalism consciously disengaged from the state's ascendancy; this neo-monumentalism functioned only to adorn structures designed on instrumentalist principles. Acknowledging that throughout history, monuments have always been the instruments, the places of power, Le Corbusier prefers, in his response to Teige, to speak in terms of elegance instead of monumentality. Although he does not avoid the political level, Le Corbusier, on his own, goes beyond the reductive understanding of the leftists of his time. Teige's view, by contrast, is dogmatic and shows to what extent Marxism had been vulgarized. The work of the proponents of instrumentality, such as Hans Meyer, emphasizes an architectonic semiosis oriented to functions. These functions are, in fact, deeds that pertain to everyday life. The deeds are analyzed, classified and put together in the most efficient relationships on the scale of the city, and down to the scale of the room via the working place and the residence. Everyday life is therefore



regulated, made efficient, under the same laws that rule the economy. "Place" is reduced to a concept of space, a product, and ultimately a representation.

Therefore, "Instrumentalist" work demonstrates an overestimation of the economic moment; an overestimation which is held to be legitimated by Marxist theory. But Marx did not speak about the exclusivity of economic factors as much as their ultimate determining character, especially in a bourgeois society with a capitalist mode of production. The fact that the theory has been so widely misunderstood shows well the power of the economic moment.

In fact, if anything, we might presume that Marx did not want his theory to justify a purely economic approach to human productive activity, as the advocates of instrumentality ended up doing. As Henri Lefebvre pointed out², the capitalist mode of production rests entirely on the representation principle and exists because of it and for it. A representation phenomenon: the value of the work that produces the goods is represented by the working time, in turn represented by money. The product is advertised through representations, (we are convinced by a certain lifestyle that comes with the product), and finally traded against an equivalence, i.e., a monetary representation dissociated from the cost of the originating labour. The product, a representation, stands for the absent. Thus a product shows no trace of its origins. A collective consciousness of the chain of representation would ultimately break it. This is what Marx thought.

A space, according to Henri Lefebvre, is produced by economic activity. It is therefore a product - a representation. Ideally, however, a space would be worked upon by an architect, and become a place. Thus, instead of there being representations which speak of absence, there could be creations of architecture - places that speak of presence. In Lefebvre's terms, the architect creates a place of presence within a space of absence.

Architecture Parlante

Discourse as knowledge stems from the very deepest roots of our culture and is indissociable from the Western metaphys-

ics. In fact, it could be said in archetypal terms that our culture rests solely on two characters that did not leave written work: Socrates and Christ.

Language has had a long history and a repressive presence since then. Ferdinand de Saussure set the ground for modern semiology, which itself dwelt on the purported primacy of speech and other related orders of representation as the only access to knowledge. Lévi-Strauss extended the scope of this approach as is clearly seen in *Triste Tropique*. The chapter entitled "The Writing Lesson", according to Derrida, contains a "linguistic and metaphysical phonologism" which raises speech above writing.³

Just as speech was raised, historically, above writing, speech was raised above architectural knowledge as well. Alain Guitheux and Dominique Rouillard have stated that one of the first allusions known to the linguistic model as reference in architecture was made by J.L. de Cordemoy.⁴ Cordemoy depicted the relationship between Michelangelo's dome for St. Peter's and its canopy by Bernini, as a "pleonasm, so to speak". He continues, "to speak intelligibly, [it is] an insipid repetition".⁵

Since "repetition" is merely another figure of speech, the apology in fact, has no point. Repetition too belongs to the realm of rhetoric. There is here a blatant aporia. In other words, Cordemoy, realizing that the metaphor belongs to the irrational world of the literary work, apologizes and gives a more intelligible argument. Though he tries to be more rational, he ends up using another metaphor.

Cordemoy gives what Michel Foucault would call a commentary; makes an attempt to say the non-said. But a commentary, the justifying ground of modern sciences, implicitly acknowledges an excess of meaning to the signified that cannot be spelled out - a fact that has never been admitted by the "scientific mind".

Therefore, in this role, language itself was a handy tool to approach the truth: its spontaneity made it the ideal companion to the Cartesian "vision as perception". In this line of thought architecture could not recreate itself of its own, (that is being *arché-tecture*), but it became parlante.

Appropriated by architectural critics, "the tool" has been improved to the extent of becoming a so-called 'meta-language', especially in the hands of the structuralists. The illusion became

so real that it has been taken for reality.

The denial of our metaphorical mode of thinking resulted in an anthropocentrism: a monolithic concept of Man as a rational being in control of everything. Rational discourse would not allow itself in the metaphorical spheres for fear of multiple interpretations, of multiple experiences which ultimately result in differences. Therefore, determined by a conventional system of signs, the building came to be designed on restrictive rational principles.

The Tragic View

Although brief, the criticism of these two repressive moments, (economic and semiologic), each claiming authority, exemplifies the inherent contradictions found within any rational discourse. The work could be extended to demonstrate similar repressions in the "knowledges" created by those whose system of reference is determined by other moments; such as sociology, religion, the arts and crafts movements and its ideological opponent, the hi-tech movement, and so on.

As we have seen, this segregation soon leads to the flattening of differences, the source of beauty. It is this relationship that becomes "place" beyond the subject and the object; beyond the dual view of the world brought about by rationalism.

The 'lived', that is, everyday life, is the starting point of *poiésis*, it is an essential point of departure, but the creator never stays at this point. Creation must emerge and assimilate all knowledges.

A *poiésis* never starts from knowledge but contains all knowledges. The process includes many contradictions which are alluded to in the production of a single moment. It includes and crystallizes every moment: economic, semiologic, social and so on. Even if one moment predominates, it does not crush the others.

The *poiésis* work brings the tragic back into our lives. For it was Nietzsche, of course, who argued that tragedy presents us with the destruction of the individual in a way which is exalting as it gives a view of the underlying power of life forces in which we share, but which are glimpsed only when ordinary individuality is transcended.

Differences, that is, the relationship between particularities, becomes a positive generator of *poiésis* creations. Their juxtaposition, if the opportunity is taken, creates the exalting tragic effect, a *poiésis* in a harmonic relationship with the cosmos.

Everyday life conceals a dialectic movement between itself and the tragic: tragedy is the non-everyday life, the anti-everyday life. Tragedy brings back what everyday life tends to hide or misrepresent: violence, wars, aggressions. Tragic knowledge unifies the two aspects - it tends to transform everyday life by *poiésis* and overcome death by the resurrection of the tragic character.

Modern society alludes to tragedy by means of representations. Yet modern societies function on death principles; wars destroy everything a country possesses, purge the means of

production of their temporary excess and restart an accumulation on a new technological foundation.⁶ Similarly, everyday life tragedies allow the mode of production to function. This is not to say that everyday life cannot bring pleasure, especially for those who live in the infra-everyday life, i.e., those who benefit the most from the best comforts brought from technology; but this is exactly where the problem lies: this tragic era denies tragedy. Everyday life has in itself what it denies and what denies it. The tragic is the negated negation that everyday life seeks psychically to annihilate by the obliteration of differences.

This obliteration can be done as we have seen, through oppressive authoritative moments, such as the economic and its embodiment in architecture: instrumentally, or by semiology and its restrictive architectural system of signs. Therefore, the architect has the responsibility to consciously overcome this oppression by imposing the authority of the *poiésis*; the real authority of architecture. The process involves a starting point in "lived experience" and a re-emergence from it, accumulating all knowledges. The obstacle as we might suspect is that everyone involved in a building process has his/her own representation of the space; qualitative and/or quantitative. If one aspect dominates, then the architect has failed in *poiésis* and has lost authority ■

NOTES

1. Baird, George, "Architecture and Politics, a Polemical Dispute", *Opposition 4*, New York, 1975.
2. Lefebvre, Henri, *La Présence et l'Absence, Contribution à la Théorie des Représentations*, Casterman, Paris 1980
3. Derrida, Jacques, *Of Grammatology*, John Hopkins University Press, 1977
4. Guiheux, Alain and Rouillard, Dominique, "L'Architecture Parlante, une Autre Crise. Mesure Pour Mesure, Architecture et Philosophie, Cahiers Du CCI Numero Spécial, Édition Centre Georges Pompidou, 1987.
5. "Comme le Grand ou le Maître-Autel est la pièce principale des Églises, l'on doit faire en sorte que tout ce qui entre dans leur dessin ne soit que pour l'autel et que par rapport à lui. Il semble aussi que l'intention de Michel-Ange, en faisant dans Saint-Pierre de Rome, comme plusieurs nefs aboutissantes à l'autel, n'ait été que pour le mieux faire apercevoir, et plus agréablement, de quelque côté qu'on y arrivât; et qu'en donnant un dôme à cette église, son dessin n'ait été que d'élever un superbe dais, ou baldaquin au-dessus de ce même autel. D'où il paraît que le cavalier Bernini n'a fait qu'un pléonisme, pour ainsi dire, en matière d'architecture, ou pour parler plus intelligiblement, qu'une fade répétition, en élevant ce second baldaquin de bronze, qui a coûté des sommes immenses, et n'a rien ajouté à la beauté de cet édifice". From: *Nouveau Traité de toute l'Architecture, ou L'Art de Bâtir*. J.L. de Corderoy, 1714
6. For a good elaboration of this theory - Lewis Mumford's book, *Technics and Civilization*, 1934

Dans un premier temps, François Lafontaine discute de deux "moments" hégéliens: l'instrumentalité puis, la semiologie. Il tente, dans un deuxième temps, de décrire la création poétique comme voie possible dans une société ségréguée mais homogène.