

TEXT-CONTEXT- TEXTUALITY- (SECOND) T E X T

I

Basically, con-text implies a text and an environment, which necessarily means a difference exists between these entities. They can be delimited. The text is framed and bounded. The context limits the text. Only through a **controlled** application of **difference** can the separation text/context appear and persist. All of which means that the matter of context depends on the operation of difference and the installation of borders. Once borders are overrun and difference is set loose, context multiplies to infinity.

Vincent B. Leitch¹

Pre(text), subtext, TEXT, textile, texture, CONTEXT.

....From words to architecture...

The text makes visible the intellectual texture.

It is the **difference**, made visible in the texture, which defines the interface between the built text and its con-text.

Architecture is ultimately a process of differentiation which happens at several levels: ecological, societal, operational, sensorial, symbolic. These levels define the borders of architecture. They are CON-text.

by Ricardo L. Castro

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II

Sometime in the early 1980s I encountered "deconstruction" in a context totally removed from architecture. I had, for some time, been puzzled by the relationship between literary and architectural criticism. I was interested in the issues raised by post-structural critics, mostly from France, so vehemently reinterpreted by their North American counterparts, the so called "Yale Critics".²

Jonathan Culler in two of his books: *In Pursuit of Signs* and *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*³ introduced me to Jacques Derrida's notion of deconstruction and its interpretations on this side of the Atlantic by the Yale critics. Curious about the concept which seemed more related to architecture, or at least to construction, I embarked on a personal quest to discover a sort of new promised land. It evolved into a major undertaking which has given me much pleasure, coloured by periods of frustration and textural hallucination.

My discovery of deconstruction through Culler's scholarship was complemented by readings and serendipitous discoveries in a second book, a novel entitled *Small World*

written by the English literary critic and novelist David Lodge. I had been introduced to Lodge's work by a friend and colleague in the English Department at McGill University, the late Professor Leslie Duer.

Small World is a wonderful novel. In its skillfully orchestrated plot Lodge deploys satire, dark humour, burlesque and wit, to explore the travels of jet-set academics attending conferences, to discuss and to present literary texts and theories, often accompanied by romance and sex. Throughout the book Lodge manages, in a lucid and humorous way, to intersperse the entire plot of the novel with contemporary literary theory.

I devoured the novel. I was absorbed by the development of the plot but also, simultaneously, by the skillful deployment of theoretical material I had attempted to unravel in my more "academic" readings.

In one passage in the novel, Morris Zapp, a character in the novel, an American professor of English literature who considers himself a post-structuralist, presents a paper entitled "Textuality as Striptease". It is essentially a witty deconstructive discourse: a pure interpretation of the act of

curiosity and desire from one sentence to another, from one action to another, from one level of the text to another. The text unveils itself before us, but never allows itself to be possessed; and instead of striving to possess it we should take pleasure in its teasing."⁴

reading. I turn to Lodge's own text:

"Now, as some of you know, I come from a city notorious for its bars and nightclubs featuring topless and bottomless dancers. I am told--I have not personally patronized these places, but I am told on the authority of no less a person than your host at this conference, my old friend Philip Swallow, who **has** patronized them, [here several members of the audience turned in their seats to stare and grin at Philip Swallow, who blushed to the roots of his silver-grey hair] that the girls take off all their clothes before they commence dancing in front of the customers. This is not striptease, it is all strip and no tease, it is the terpsichorean equivalent of the hermeneutic fallacy of a recuperable meaning, which claims that if we remove the clothing of its rhetoric from a literary text we discover the bare facts it is trying to communicate. The classical tradition of striptease, however, which goes back to Salome's dance of the seven veils and beyond, and which survives in a debased form in the dives of your Soho, offers a valid metaphor for the activity of reading. The dancer teases the audience, and the text teases its readers, with the promise of an ultimate revelation that is infinitely postponed. Veil after veil, garment after garment, is removed, but it is the **delay** in the stripping that makes it exciting, not the stripping itself; because no sooner has one secret been revealed than we lose interest in it and **crave** another....The attempt to peer into the very core of a text, to possess once and for all its meaning, is vain--it is only ourselves that we find there, not the work itself. Freud said that obsessive reading (and I suppose that most of us in this room must be regarded as compulsive readers)- that obsessive reading is the displaced expression of a desire to see the mother's genitals [here a young man in the audience fainted and was carried out] but the point of the remark, which may have not been entirely appreciated by Freud himself, lies precisely in the concept of displacement. To read is to **surrender** oneself to an endless displacement of

This passage of the book stands out because of its perspicacity rather than its forthright language. Here Lodge deals with such Derridean oppositions as presence/absence (the passage presents an absent concept: deconstruction, which incidentally is never mentioned in the book at all), literal/metaphorical, central/marginal (the main text in contrast with sub-texts in parentheses describing simultaneous actions). Ultimately, the reader must struggle with the opposition of pleasure/cognition, described by the fictional character yet implicit in our own act of reading. The Derridean notions of **différance** (delay) and **différance** (difference), pronounced the same way in French, are implicit in the text. Consider the description of stripping which is delayed as it is being narrated, and now read.

Lodge's novel like every piece of literary work, and by extension any work of architecture, permits endless readings, endless interpretations. These, essentially, constitute "second texts".

I have never ceased to enjoy reading David Lodge's work. It was a delightful surprise to find one of his texts recently included in what attempts to be the most comprehensive and up-to-date publication on the subject of deconstruction in architecture.⁵ In his article Lodge lucidly reviews the 1988 Tate Gallery Symposium on Deconstruction, contributing one of the clearest summaries of the arcane subject as a whole. I must cite his concluding remarks which should serve as a basis of reflection:

Architects, in short, appear to be scrambling onto the Deconstructionist bandwagon just at the moment when literary intellectuals are jumping off. It remains to be seen whether this will save the cause of Deconstruction or consign the architecture to limbo.⁶

III

The essays assembled in this issue of *The Fifth Column* can be considered as "second texts". They are interpretations of architecture or related issues and themes, written by students at the McGill School of Architecture in the context of two seminars (undergraduate and graduate) offered in 1988-1989. The authors attempt to explore and discuss one of the most hermetic and controversial movements of our times.

NOTES

1. Vincent B. Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 160.
2. Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman are the Yale critics. They, with Jacques Derrida, published the so called Yale Manifesto under the title *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1979).
3. Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981).
- *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982).
4. David Lodge, *Small World* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), pp.26-27.
5. Andrea Papadakis, Catherine Cooke and Andrew Benjamin, editors, *Deconstruction: Omnibus Volume* (London: Academy Editions, 1989).
6. David Lodge, "Deconstruction: A Review of the Tate Gallery Symposium" in Andreas Papadakis, et al., *Deconstruction...*, p. 90.