



*L'architecture et la publicité sont semblables et corollaires. Un survol historique démontre que tous deux fondent sur l'ambivalence du continuum que nous habitons leurs fonctions de symbolisation et de perpétuation de la culture.*

In a world where, as Jean Baudrillard diagnoses not without irony, "we no longer partake from the drama of alienation, but are in the ecstasy of communication,"<sup>1</sup> it is tempting to trace analogies between architecture and advertising. In the most simple sense, the technological products of both activities often embrace uncritically the dominating ideology of late capitalism. In trying to sell an image they become repressive tools that curtail, rather than truly enhance, human freedom. As the instruments of technopolitical aims, both the office towers that house the major oil companies in Houston, for example, and the technically sophisticated advertisements that we admire between rather dull television programs, are not very different in their function as transparent signs of a logocentric power structure. Both architecture and advertising are able to use their power of seduction to promote a

single idea and sustain the illusion of an absolute order, i.e., the best of all possible worlds which is supposed to be our technologically advanced consumer's civilization, the last, most comfortable and efficient, the latest manifestation of the single historical narrative resulting from the rational and "scientific" exploitation of the world. Thus both advertisement and architecture can generate desires in the masses that result in calculated, preconceived aims, with their usual reward for the manipulator: the control and accumulation of economic means and power.

Many ethical questions arise at this point, questions that for obvious reasons are more obscure for architecture than for advertisement, as this latter activity is at least much more explicit about its aims. And yet, despite the obvious differences between commercial promotion and architecture, it is clear that the political success of an architectural *praxis* is closely related to its public impact, and advertisement is a paradigm of successful communication, one that addresses the social "common ground." In order to grasp the complex ethical questions surrounding this issue we need a better understanding of human action in general. Particularly



important is the distinction that we must recognize between architecture as an art, i.e. a setting-into-work of truth by the embodied imagination, and other technological products.

This problem has been discussed by many eminent philosophers in the recent past. While their interpretations differ in their implications, Martin Heidegger,<sup>2</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer<sup>3</sup> and Gianni Vattimo,<sup>4</sup> have all recognized the privileged nature of the work of art as the *locus* of being and truth. Vattimo speaks of a being and truth that we may call "weak" to differentiate it from the "strong" transcendental Being of the past: the presumed absolute truth of traditional religion, science or metaphysics. It is nevertheless interesting to remember that Georges Bataille, concerned with the possibility of liberating humanity from the servitude imposed by the same logocentric power structures and the illusion of "absolute" metaphysical truth of science and traditional religions, believed that architecture was the paradigmatic symbol of these repressive powers, one that therefore should be blown to pieces in order to fulfil the promises of individual freedom enshrined by the French revolution. Bataille therefore opposed writing to architecture,<sup>5</sup> the writing of "absence," thus taking to its most radical consequences a belief about the nature of human action as negation.

Given the perennial disproportion between external reality and the mortal human condition, man has always been impelled to transform the world, to fabricate (myths/technology) and thus compensate for his inability to adapt to the environment. This condition has been a fundamental theme of mythical articulations, from the fall of man in the Holy Scriptures, to the myth of Prometheus in the Hellenic tradition, all of which concern the ambivalent and ethical character of the human imagination that generates actions in order to come to terms with this disproportion.<sup>6</sup> Bataille's understanding is that these actions, at all times, have constituted a form of negation of the given reality. This being the case, and agreeing with Bataille's hope for the emancipation of humanity, we would have to accept his wish for the death of architecture, or at best, its transformation into a soft simulation, a cyberspace in our computer terminals that we may at least be able to turn off as we become weary of its seductive appearance, just as we turn off an annoying advertisement on television.

This scenario, we might argue, is not so terrible after all. There are, indeed, numerous television commercials and advertisements in the metro that we admire. Their power of seduction is often so great that it seems to question the productive objective that sponsored them. These commercials, obviously not always efficient, make it to the film festival each year and we even pay a few dollars to appreciate their aesthetic qualities. In this case, it would be possible to claim, again with Baudrillard, that seduction is a new figure of our freedom, truly capable of deconstructing production,<sup>7</sup> and we could even imagine, as the best possibility in this framework, an architecture-turned-simulation that through the intentional superficiality of the image and its "glossiness" may produce a giddiness akin to that of a soft drug. Such an "architecture," one

that necessarily bypasses the body, depends for its effectiveness on the very suspension of fulfilment, on the recognition that "meaning," beyond form, should not be intended, and that our only chance, in the era of electronic information, is to hope for a discourse absorbed into its own signs without a trace of meaning. It is of course better to have simulated public space than repressive, "real" public spaces; reduced consciousness is preferable to acute pain....

Let us examine in simple language the fundamental philosophical premises implicit in this position. Perhaps we will then be capable to contemplate other possible options for an ethical practice of architecture, beyond the acceptance of its reduction to a formal game and a simulation. We may start by asking if it is truly a simple matter for man (and architect) to accept that there is no meaning after Nietzsche has reminded us of the death of God. Must our openness to death inevitably result in a deconstructive, negative nihilism? The very premise of human action as negation remains problematic, as does that of the irrevocable demise of the human (individual) imagination, despite our recognition of the absence of an absolute, transcendental ground. Also problematic is the assumption, fundamental for Gilles Deleuze and other deconstructive writers, that meaning is not given in the pre-reflective engagement of our embodied being in the world.<sup>8</sup> Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty among others, have shown the impossibility of "explaining" meaning in human experience as simply a product of intellectual operations and associations of a Cartesian mind.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, if one follows Hans Blumenberg's argument in his recent study on the relevance of myth in Western culture,<sup>10</sup> it is possible to posit that affirmation is always a component of human action as well, operating in the phenomenological, vivid present, enacted by a self, an embodied consciousness, that is indeed not reducible to the Cartesian ego cogito. Blumenberg demonstrates the fallacy involved in the notion that myth, the paradigmatic human narrative that concerns affirmation and reconciliation, is simply "left behind" or transformed into philosophical discourse back in classical Greece. The possibility of myth as a discourse of affirmation, allowing us to account for the fact that meaning is in fact inescapable, is of course the province of literature and, I would argue, also of architecture as a narrative form, the option that I consider preferable and most appropriate to our present situation. This, I must emphasize, does not mean that the "truth" set-into-work by architecture is in any way the absolute truth of the Western metaphysical tradition. And yet, the architect must accept the ethical responsibility that accompanies this expectation.

Already in the 16th century Giordano Bruno observed, in his rather little known work *De vinculis in genere*, that the power of manipulation of the magician was the power of eros.<sup>11</sup> For the magician to exert an effective power it was important that he be a vigorous lover. He had to be able to fall in love in order to seduce



effectively and then maintain the seduced object under control. In other words, despite the precocious recognition by Bruno of the autonomy of this realm of human manipulation from the framework of values of traditional Christianity, one which can be read as a precursor of the modern world of commercial signs and advertisements, he often emphasized that faith was the prior condition for magic. He understood that both the magician (or doctor, or prophet or, we might add, Renaissance artist or architect) and the subject, had to be credulous in order to accomplish anything. Both the architect and the public accepted the primacy of perception and recognized the presence of meaning through a condition that today we would call perceptual faith. At the inception of the modern world, however, the option to engage in either white or black magic was clearly present.

This option, according to mythical narratives, was present since the beginning of human civilization. Man has been impelled to make an ethical choice between action as reconciliation and action as domination, and has recognized the potential dangers of the latter, particularly in relation to a transcendental framework of values. Today it is clear that the transcendental framework is absent. And yet we understand desire as the phenomenological origin of meaning in general. It is the ever present desire in our experience that gives our acts a sense of direction and purpose, that constitutes the first manifestation of the human imagination and demands a narrative structure to articulate our felt sense of temporality, where past and future projections become inescapable dimensions of the vivid present. By fulfilling desires technology controls, but the technological manipulator must not fall in love. In fact, compassion must be excluded from technological action in order to maintain the distance that allows for control. Such an "unethical" attitude goes hand in hand with the embracing of an ego-less consciousness, one which also gives up the narrative structures that constitute our only way to articulate an *ethos*. This is the attitude that can of course be seen as epitomized in advertisement.

Technology, our world, is both an unsurmountable wall between man and nature, and an environment so closely fitted to our needs and desires that it may be possible to say that the initial distance between man and his environment, the condition that differentiated man from animals, has been obliterated. Such is our dangerous and ambivalent reality. We could therefore interpret technology as an accomplished form of black magic, generating its own artificial desires and obliterating the inveterate gap between our embodied consciousness and the world, the very condition of thought, language and human culture. Deconstructive philosophy, as it justifiably argues for the dissolution of the ego in the context of the history of philosophy, often fails to understand the crucial difference between this Cartesian ego and the imagining self which is truly in danger in our technological culture. Do we really wish to become chickens, mindless subjects conditioned by advertisement and technological fulfilment, strictly speaking, leading a life beyond desire?

It could also be argued that, on the other hand, by adopting a critical attitude and withholding fulfilment, the artist-architect also controls. And yet it is precisely the artist's prerogative to intend reconciliation rather than domination. A self-transformation of the architect, perhaps best articulated by Martin Heidegger's notion of *Gelassenheit*, as a possible new relationship between man and the "things" that make up the technological world, is required in order to fulfil this potential of the work of art.<sup>12</sup> An ethical attitude of response-ability, caring and compassion, articulated through narrative, is an important part of this self-transformation.

Over and beyond the well-known perils of self-destruction and ecological disaster that now haunt humanity, the technological enframing has been shown by Heidegger to pose more subtle and yet more grave dangers.<sup>13</sup> The reduction of the external world to a "picture" and the physical reality to a material "standing reserve," underline all aspects of the destructive nihilism at the end of the modern age. Heidegger also warned, however, that a nostalgic escape from technology and its discourse contemplated as an option by architecture critics like Christian Norberg-Schultz and other "post-modern style" architects, is simply not possible. Technology is not a condition that can be criticized by "stepping out," by espousing the values of "traditional" art and architecture, metaphysics or humanism. The "way out" must be sought by acknowledging the mysterious origins of technology itself, through *Gelassenheit*, a "release" of the "things" in the world, a "letting things be" opposed to any will to power (distinct also from the instrumental formulations of being-in-the-world that characterize Heidegger's own earlier philosophical writings), and through *Verwindung*, a strategy of deconstruction of the languages of science and technology.<sup>14</sup> Thus it could finally be possible to collapse the difference between technological and aesthetic culture, and with it, the difference between rationalism and irrationalism that has sustained the culture of modernity and its architecture during the last two hundred years.

For architecture, as opposed to advertising, such a revised attitude towards technology is crucial. In order to set truth into work, architecture must accept technology as its world, and yet, it must also twist and overcome it, in a way that challenges the very idea of historical progress (and the avant-garde) inherited from the early modern (17th century) notions of scientific linear history. Thus the architect must establish a different relationship with the artifacts of her/his tradition. The most brilliant philosopher of the early 18th century, Giambattista Vico, had already recognized the privileged status of art as the objects of "concrete poetry", as embodiments of truths otherwise articulated through myth. These objects, the traces of history, can be interpreted as a personal engagement of the embodied consciousness with the "stuff" of the world, a primordial product of the self's imagination. In the context of Vico's rejection of the Cartesian *ego*, his understanding of *verum ipsum factum* (man only knows what he makes), cannot be confused with the products of technology. A key to this distinction is the ethical role of the personal imagination in the act of making, a



careful, thoughtful, and compassionate making. Vico's *New Science*, I believe, can be read as the first instance where this distinction is implicitly articulated, together with the questioning of the grand narrative of Judeo-Christian history.<sup>15</sup> It is paramount that the contemporary architect understand this distinction. In order to carry his/her work beyond mere seductive formalism (the best possible scenario for an architecture that "gives up" meaning), the architect must draw from the works of the past that appear as *loci* of being, and attempt a "translation" of this perception into the works of the present. The best model that comes to mind is the "translation" of James Joyce from the *Odyssey* to *Ulysses*. The being that may thus shine forth in the work is qualitatively different from the absolute truth of science and metaphysics, and can be better defined by the original Greek term *aletheia*, which according to Heidegger implies an unveiling that acknowledges the something that always remains concealed, a "truth" never given once and for all, one which recognizes the absence of God from human affairs and yet, despite Derrida's puns,<sup>16</sup> does not end up in a negative nihilism.

We may believe that we inhabit the homogeneous space of Descartes and that objects do not change their being when they move from site to site. We may therefore applaud an "architecture" of objects or prosthetic projections. The imaginary space of Galileo (indeed, only an imaginary space where the laws of inertia operate!) became the assumed space of modern democratic states and technopolitics. Of course, the "truth as correspondence" of applied science works... In such a world, a "weak" technological world, it is not hard to believe that the television image is more real than the tactile reality that is given to our whole, embodied being, before "stimuli" become differentiated by the senses. All this notwithstanding, space is and will remain different in Montreal and in Toronto, we "understand" Paris by simply stepping off the train, and grasp the absurdity of expressing "aesthetic" judgments about buildings after "decontextualizing" them, as if they could really exist as objects, devoid of any context whatsoever. We know that we all have the potential to perceive differently, that our body "knows," and that mysteries remain on the very surface of our experience. We also recognize that our present "common ground," our glorified bubble diagram of television rooms, is indeed a reduced realm of experience.

This is the ambivalent continuum that we inhabit in this modern/postmodern world, and art and architecture, as opposed to advertising and other technological images, must keep addressing this very ambivalence, in the hope of retrieving the traditional (and crucial) function of symbolization for the perpetuation of culture. The richness of architecture, and our very hope for its survival as space/place, ultimately depends on its rejection of any reduction of the building or construction to the status of sign, meant simply to be "read" by a disembodied mind, regardless of how much more "politically efficient" it may become by adopting the strategies of advertisement and simulation.

#### Notes

1. Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, New York: Semiotext(e), 1988, p. 22.
2. Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art in Poetry, Language, Thought*, New York: Harper and Row, 1971.
3. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
4. Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1988.
5. This is the reading of Bataille's work by Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture, The Writings of Georges Bataille*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988, ch. 1 and 2.
6. See Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, ch. 1 and 2.
7. Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1990.
8. See Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et Répétition*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968, pp. 89-90.
9. For an introduction to the thesis of the "primacy of perception" and the limitations of intellectual reductionism, see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1971.
10. Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988.
11. In this regard, see Ioan P. Couliano, *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
12. I am particularly fond of David M. Levin's interpretation of Heidegger's *Gelassenheit* and his attempt to see this self-transformation in relation to Merleau-Ponty's late philosophy. See D.M. Levin, *The Opening of Vision*, New York and London: Routledge, 1988.
13. Martin Heidegger, *The Question concerning Technology*, New York: Harper and Row, 1977.
14. For an interpretation of the implications of *Verwindung* that results in a Nietzschean reading of Heidegger's philosophy as a form of "active nihilism" see Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, op. cit.
15. My reading of Vico, obviously at odds with H. Arendt's, would demand a more lengthy treatment. It is of course debatable whether Vico had as much foresight as some commentators (myself included) seem to think. I have been recently inclined to believe that, just as a geometrician like Girard Desargues could conceive of projective geometry 200 years before it became an official alternative to Euclidean geometry, and Nietzsche can be read as a postmodern philosopher, Vico, regardless of his "Christian" context, seems to be articulating a precocious hermeneutic philosophy. See *The New Science*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1971.
16. I am referring here to Derrida's "atelia," his designation for the ahistorical false god of the tele-era. See *La Carte Postale*, Paris: Flammarion, 1980.

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