GHOSTS IN THE CELL: THEMATIC SPECULATIONS ON ARCHITECTURE, THE CITY AND THE BODY
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Abstract: This paper offers four different thematic speculations about the relationship between the contemporary urban condition, architectural poiesis and the body located in space. In the first two speculations, the current understanding of the urban condition is analysed as being a surface condition in which otherness has expanded into an array of minor differences, which consequentially has resulted in contemporary representational techniques having started to suffer from an increased lack of precision. In the following two speculations, architecture is discussed as a form of bodily subordination, which turns its inhabitants into vague figures which are then inscribed into the city as well as into the architecture.

Key words: space, otherness, poiesis, representation

CITY: SURFACE AND OTHERNESS

As is well documented in a great number of films, short stories, novels, drawings and other forms of cultural expression, urban spaces have evoked a wide variety of artistic responses. If only based on the 'overwhelming evidence' found in these works, it seems that the profound experiences of condensed space have always been an intricate part of the metropolis. Numbing, exciting, paralysing, frightening, exhilarating, intoxicating; the metropolis has been the source of spatial sensations that are both transformed into works of art and often implemented as a principle, model or metaphor due to their unique construction. An impressive number of disciplines have dealt with the city, ranging from the philosophical contemplation in Georg Simmel's description of *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, in which he links the intensification of personal mental activity with the outburst of stimuli caused by metropolitan life,[1] to the more modern forms of art, such as Dziga Vertov's montages in *Man with a Movie Camera*, which is an enduring and breathtaking ode to the city and the revolutionary energies it holds.[2]

I deliberately chose these more classic examples of metropolitan exuberance in an attempt to clarify their similarities and important differences when compared with contemporary reflections. In the last couple of decades, spatial experiences of the city have been described by using theories taken from the exact sciences (for instance chaos or catastrophe theory[3]), and by implementing an equivalent terminology (using words such as complexity, network, multiplicity, topology and instability). This terminology marks the transition that has taken place in reflections on the urban situation, namely the shift from descriptions of the city as an undiversified space of densification, to descriptions that emphasise the city as a field of intensities and differentiation. In other words, the transition from an experience of being totally immersed in the overall congestion within metropolitan spaces (the pressure cooker model, based on a discourse on anxiety) towards an experience of navigating the intensities of urban spatial forces (the surfing model, based on a discourse on pleasure).

This distinction between being submerged and having to navigate describes the attitude apparently required today in order to manoeuvre one's way through the multiplicities of global and local realities that constitute the urban world; in other words, manoeuvring along its different pathways, easily shifting focus or perspective, participating in different discourses and debates, being simultaneously engaged in several social and spatial practices, etcetera. As one becomes a potential player in different games on different boards, an appropriate form of navigation should enable one to move along different surfaces.[4] Navigation therefore becomes a specific exploratory technique that enables connection and/or access to the multitude of relevant surfaces available. In this environment, one becomes an intrinsic part of strategic and dynamic spatial practices notable for their lack of severity and depth, the emergence of several masking practices and, ultimately, a level of dynamic superficiality. The embedded simultaneity of these contemporary surface conditions radically alters the experience of urban space and one's involvement in it.

At the same time, the coexistence of several intensities of experience

within this surface condition means that the border of otherness has been drawn increasingly nearer. The 'others' enter in close proximity, as an inevitable presence, yet they simultaneously maintain an insurmountable distance precisely because of the ephemeral nature of the practical and ideological engagements taking place. This 'distant nearness' is not only caused by the multitude of others involved in the different (disciplinary) actions, but also arises from the different roles a person plays at any given time. As a result, both the experience and exploration of metropolitan space have diversified, and our understanding of it is continually increased by a terminology that aims to distinguish minor differences. As a consequence, the tools for recording the contemporary urban condition also need to develop greater sensitivity and sophistication, which will, in the end, provide readings that can properly register this evolving condition of alterity.

POETICS : CHAOS OR DIFFERENTIATED DETACHMENT

The numbing effect of the metropolis seems to be caused by the impossibility of digesting its chaotic experiences while simultaneously negotiating multiplicities of relationships. One could argue that nowadays the chaotic complexity rooted in the spatial experience of the surface condition is moving towards, or has begun to overlap, the 'original chaos' of sensory experience. In his reflections on 'poietica', Paul Valéry used the term 'original chaos' when describing the two constituent parts essential to the mental life of a 'highly developed' human being.[5] Valéry distinguished between the efficiency and utility of social interaction (which is inherently limited) and the full experience of a personal mental state (which lies at the basis of artistic practice and is potentially unique). To retrace this 'original chaos', Valéry argued, entails acceptance of the entire range of sensory impressions, including 'personal impressions – the spots and stains – the "mistakes"'.[6]

Valéry used the term to clarify the specific limitations that result from the emergence of language and discourse. Representational devices such as words are invented to describe the original chaos, i.e. all matter and thoughts, concepts and things/ objects in the world around us. In themselves, words are devoid of content but acquire their meaning through an historical process. However, Valéry warns us that meaning has a tendency to become rather fixed, at least in linguistic representations. The renewed opening up of sensorial experience towards the original chaos would 'guarantee' the endless fabrications of language games and sustain a wide variety of linguistic genres, from prose to poetics, idiosyncrasies to platitudes, and from chatter to debate. In this sense, the process of becoming aware of the original chaos is simultaneously a breaking open of fixed meanings and a deliberate attempt to detach oneself from the direct relationships embedded in discourse.

If the characteristics of contemporary urban spatial experiences can indeed be considered equivalent to the explicit nature of this 'original chaos' of sensorial experience, the contradiction embedded in this comparison is even more intriguing. Valéry describes a personal mental state which is not shared with others, as opposed to the social space which is, in principle, shared and filled with various forms of social control and discipline. The form of isolation Valéry seeks for artistic practices, and which is reminiscent of Nietzsche's 'light solitude',[7] becomes an incredibly difficult, if not impossible, position to maintain in the current state of surface conditions described above, since the surface conditions presuppose an ability to navigate the different social structures, networks and constellations which have emerged. The 'unbearable lightness' of the surface condition seems to stand in stark contrast to the sensibility and sensitive isolation needed for artistic production. However, perhaps the fault lines that arise from this complex, schizophrenic situation – namely the cracks and open ends that extend infinitely within the various relationships, practices and discourses in which one engages – can initiate a different state of imagination. This imagination would instigate a widening of the discourse towards an architectural design process that emerges from the characteristics of the contemporary surface condition itself.

If, as Valéry has defined it, architecture is an 'ode of space to itself'[8] then the solitude required for architectural production should aim towards achieving a mental state that anticipates the poetic.[9] At this point, two distinct historical interpretations should be mentioned with regard to the poetic and the poetic experience of space in architecture. These interpretations became apparent with the increasing use of the term poiesis in postmodern debates. The first understanding of poiesis refers to the Greek meaning of poetics as 'making',[10] namely the bringing together of the

immaterial and the material, the meeting of thought and matter, which is mostly discussed with reference to poetry in literature. The second understanding refers to poetics as 'creation', the processes out of which something transpires that is either an organism (*auto-poiesis*,[11] which is self-generating and basically creates more of the 'same'), or an artificial construct (*allo-poiesis*, which fabricates something 'other').[12] Following the argument thus far, any form of the poetic nowadays is probably only to be found in the superficiality and absence of any fixed 'ground' within the described current social constructs. If a form of 'detachment' is imperative when considering the consequences of the surface conditions for architectural design processes, then the issue of representation becomes equally crucial when, as I mentioned above, the relevant tools for recording also need to be reconsidered. In itself, detachment is already inherently part of any form of representation, including the architectural drawing, as both words and lines are disconnected from the object they intend to represent. This leaves only the form and degree of detachment as the 'means' towards achieving the levels of sophistication required to discern minor differences. As a consequence, both the tools for recording and the representational devices require less rather than more precision. However contradictory this may seem, the objective should therefore be an attempt to detect and analyse a greater number of minor differences through the implementation of a set of tools that 'suffer' from an increased lack of precision. This process of disconnecting from the apparatuses allows for an easier access to the 'others'.

PRISON: SUBORDINATION THROUGH ARCHITECTURE

The terms mentioned thus far, such as 'detachment', 'superficiality' and 'lack of precision', are generally seen as characteristics to avoid, and therefore 'negative'. In contrast, architecture is considered to be essentially 'positive' in nature and, at present, this attitude is more emphasised than ever. The desire to draw attention to this 'constructive' characteristic of architecture seems inexhaustible for those active in the field. According to this vision, the negative is acceptable in other forms of art, such as literature or music, but not in architecture, which is perceived as fundamentally constructive because it deals with the 'bringing together' of substance and operates 'towards' a physical construction (i.e. what was described above as *poiesis*). What is neglected, however, is the fact that the poetic itself has another, inherently negative and disturbing side.[13] Already in Plato's nation state, for example, the poet is actually the one who causes danger and might bring the city to ruin, and thus needs to be expelled. Plato's condemnation of art foresees the element of seduction, the experience of beauty, which overwhelms the spectator and provokes dysfunction, or at least unproductive distraction.[14] If architecture is potentially poetic, or can offer a poetic experience of space, then the inherent negative aspect needs to be both acknowledged and dealt with.

The negative equivalent of construction, namely destruction, is then, in Nietzschian terms, the way through which new values and new work can emerge;[15] or, as Giorgio Agamben recently stated, it is the correct way to escape from aesthetics and the silent pleasures of art, which would eradicate quite violently any possible way of understanding a work of art. Agamben argues that we need this 'loss' and 'abyss', for 'if it is true that the fundamental architectural problem becomes visible only in the house ravaged by fire, then perhaps we are today in a privileged position to understand the authentic significance of the Western aesthetic project'.[16] In addition to the 'divine terror' of aesthetic distraction and the uncanny possibility of destructive disaster – two of the inherent 'dangers' of any architecture – one could point to a third inherently negative aspect of architecture: namely the levels of control architecture inflicts on its users and inhabitants. To a very large extent, each architectural form or space determines the range of spatial possibilities, thus limiting potential movement and behaviour. This means that each work of architecture is also a device that imposes order and discipline, if only through its function of 'housing bodies'.

So, evidently, we are already *Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture*,[17] but in order to explore the impact of that insight on architecture, the current understanding of the nature of the prison needs to be clarified. The classical model of the prison, which makes a clear distinction between inside and outside, has already been wonderfully reversed in the Zone of Tarkovski's film *Stalker*,[18] and in Rem Koolhaas's graduation project. More recently, Agamben introduced the prison camp as a model for the contemporary city, namely as the 'nomos of the political space in which we

are still living'.[19] The camp is the permanent location to which one can be outlawed. For Agamben, the lawfully marginalised, the ones subjected to excessive control and fierce discipline, are no longer the exception, even though they have not necessarily become the rule either. The camp is the 'fourth, inseparable element' that needs to be added to the 'old trinity'[20] composed of the state, the nation, and land. The marginalised no longer inhabit the periphery; instead, the marginal and the periphery are dispersed within the field of differentiation. They are located everywhere and thus nowhere in particular. This has consequences for architecture as well, as the whole array of 'others', as described both in the contemporary surface condition and in the dissemination within the urban field, need to virtually find their 'place' within the order that architecture proposes. Architecture is therefore no longer dealing with the (endless) repetition of the same order, as in Hilberseimer's *Groszstadt* for instance, but is supposed to enable the diversification of difference itself, *ad infinitum*.

From an architectural point of view, Agamben's argument requires elaboration. For instance, he does not make any specific distinction between different types of camps, nor does he explain the spatial organisation of the camp. Moreover, neither the camp nor the 'state of exception' can come into existence without a proper boundary or defence line, implemented to delineate the different sides. This concept of 'border thinking' has also been introduced recently in the social sciences, and especially in post-colonial studies, in order to foster other ways of thinking about the project of modernity besides the dominant Western one. Border thinking has the attribute of being able to balance the dominant versus dominated positions, while at the same time taking the marginal areas of exchange into consideration. It has an equally sensitive appreciation for both sides of any divide. In this context, J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* provides an intriguing reference, as it gives a wonderful account of the immanent possibilities (and, to be honest, disasters as well) of that border condition. In Coetzee's book, the outer edges of the empire slowly become the place where the outsiders, i.e. the barbarians, form the all too attractive counterpoint to established culture. In first instance, this state of affairs is met with hostile acts of protectionism and invasions, but after a while a slow process occurs whereby both sides of the divide become 'infected' with the characteristics of each other's culture.

BODY: FOLDED SILHOUETTE OR DIVIDED SHADOW

The lingering questions that become apparent in this discussion are, in fact, tangible ones: how are the 'others' actually situated in architecture? How are their physical characteristics manifested in the spatial configurations of architectural constructs? If the human body is implicitly present in architectural projects, then what exactly would or could constitute this bodily presence? In other words, how are the 'others' simply re-presented? As stated, the tendency to open the discourse to a multitude of others introduces a 'new' set of possibilities and virtual movements in space.[21] The 'others' have become diversified entities to such an extent that the dialogue with them suffers increasingly from a lack of clear definition. To solve this issue, they can only be represented as vague physical beings. They start to resemble silhouettes or spectres, bodily entities whose characteristics are never precise, never distinct, and which never form a clearly defined physical manifestation of a personality. Hence we are not dealing with disembodied entities,[22] but ones that consist of such a multiplicity of non-related characteristics, each one becomes a 'Körper ohne Eigenschaften': a body without qualities.

Within the context of the discussion that sees all architecture as inevitably dealing with the space of the prison, this 'silhouette' is reminiscent of the prisoners who are on display as objects in a panoptic machine. Yet there is a fundamental difference, since in this case the prisoner incorporates an additional number of other 'characteristics'. The prisoner is no longer objectified, classified and numbered as s/he is in the Panopticon, but becomes a being who is additionally depersonalised upon entering the grandiose structure of architecture. I would argue that this is the reason why Piranesi's *Carceri* have remained so excruciatingly fascinating to this day: the architecture that was apparently made to impress and suppress actually offers, or inclines towards, a space of absolute freedom – however false that hope of freedom might be. This is a freedom that equals the opportunity to wander eternally in the ruins of a divine past, while surpassing it because of the apparent absence of any rule.

A similar attempt at spatial freedom can be observed in the enlarged city of *New Babylon*,[23] where Constant projected an extended urban landscape in which the

individual is both lost and subjected. Some structures that Constant proposed still use an architecture that is full of subordination. In others, the *homo ludens* would be able to find freedom in an all-encompassing structure that is 'ladder'-labyrinthine (some of these are even mobile!), and through which only vague silhouettes appear to move. It seems only proper that architecture casts shadows. Inside this structure, and under the spell of these shadows, one can perhaps find a deeper understanding of the other side of order and subordination. The notion of architecture as a form of protection recedes when one realises that the real possibility of danger lies inside the house, inside architecture. The shadow cast by architectural structures is, then, not so much a threat of subordination but actually an unfulfilled promise. This is a more meaningful interpretation of *poiesis*: the ability to extend beyond the borders of articulated thinking, confirmed spatial order and expected behaviour. The vagueness and desperation embedded in the shadow actually constitute the profound mystery of architecture.

This is the ontological void from which and towards which architecture operates. After the demise of the Pantakrator, usually understood as the 'ruler of all', but also represented as the one who oversees all, as in the Panopticon, and after His replacement by the naked Modern man, an individual to whom specific characteristics could be attributed, the inhabitant of today's architecture is a silhouette who certainly has basic human characteristics, but who remains as vague as a shadow.[24] As Geert Bekaert stated, architecture is indeed '... not innocent, not harmless, (...) its fundamental task is to break down reality, and, by means of an adventurous, uncertain reconnaissance, to grant that reality new opportunities'.[25] The body of the prisoner, the tissue of the city and the contours of the silhouette all equally need to be coded, represented, transformed, and decoded. These entities firstly need to be textualised, i.e. made linguistic and/or discursive, then contextualised. When they start to be folded into a structure, an architectural statement will emerge where the body is simultaneously located in the text and in space. The map that can be drawn from this is a registration of the body inscribed into the city as well as into architecture. In an endless cycle of drawing and withdrawing, a dance of mirroring, the full and the empty are situated side by side. So, in the end, while at the end, are we then chasing ghosts? And, if we have been drawn near, then to what surface?

NOTES

1   In: Neil Leach (ed.), Rethinking Architecture; A Reader in Cultural Theory (London/NewYork: Routledge, 1997), pp. 69-79.
2   USSR, 1929, edition: Moskwood Media, based on a British Film Institute copy.
3   See, for instance: Sanford Kwinter, 'Landscapes of Change: Boccioni's "Stati d'animo" as a General Theory of Models', in: *Assemblage*, No. 19 (Dec., 1992), pp. 50-65.
4   I use the term 'surfaces' here, and not for instance 'realities', since the terms that have become increasingly important in describing the spatial experiences of the city, namely 'intensity', 'movement', 'simultaneity', indicate the change that has led to our current understanding of urban space, namely from 'place' to 'surface'. If the city is no longer theorised as a place of densification but a spatial field of intensities, then it makes much more sense to describe the contemporary urban condition as a 'surface condition'.
5   Paul Valéry, 1903, from the cahier 'Poiétique', in: Paul Valery, De macht van de afwezigheid (Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij, 2004), p. 111. The translation from Dutch is mine.
6   Ibid.
7   Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra (Lyndhurst (NJ): Barnes and Nobles, 2007).
8   Valéry, op. cit., p. 40.
9   Francesco Dal Co, 'Excellence: The Culture of Mies as Seen in his Notes and Books', in: Mies Reconsidered: His Career, Legacy, and Disciples (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1986), pp. 72-85.
10   See, for instance: OASE, 'Poiesis en architectuur', no. 40 (1994) and *AA Words* 4: Jan Turnovsky, *Poetics of a Wall Projection* (London: Architectural Association, 2005).
11   see also: Patrik Schumacher, The Autopoiesis of Architecture; A New

Framework for Architecture (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2011).

12   These two understandings of poiesis have, in a wonderful way, come together in Valéry's work, in general in his great number of notes on 'Poietica' and specifically in his Cours de Poétique of 1937.

13   See, for instance, similar arguments in Anthony Vidler's The Architectural Uncanny; Essays in the Modern Unhomely (Cambridge/London: The MIT Press, 1992), especially part 1 'Houses', in which he emphasises the 'haunted' aspect of architecture.

14   This reference to Plato's Republic comes from Giorgio Agamben, 'The Man without Context', on website: http://www.thebestrevenge.info/3126-the_man_without_content.pdf, [accessed on 12 June 2012], p. 4.

15   Nietzsche's concept of 'Umwertung aller Werte'.

16   Agamben, op.cit., p. 6.

17   The title of Rem Koolhaas's graduation project, which proposed a Berlin-Walllike structure running through London. Published, amongst others, in: O.M.A, Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, S,M,L,XL (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1995), pp. 2-21.

18   Mosfilm Studios, USSR, 1979.

19   Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer; Sovereign, Power and Bare Life (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 166.

20   Ibid, pp. 175-176.

21   According to Valéry, the virtual movements of the architect need to overlap the virtual movements of the mind.

22   I.e. Guattari & Deleuze's 'body without organs'. See: Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus; Capitalism & Schizophrenia (London: The Athlone Press, 1999), chapter 6, pp. 149-166.

23   Mark Wigley, Constant's New Babylon; The Hyper-Architecture of Desire (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1998), pp. 184-230.

24   The 'epistemological shift' from the theological to the anthropomorphic and then mechanical body to the dissolved bodies of postmodernity has been accurately described by Ignasi de Solà-Morales in: 'Absent Bodies', in Cynthia C. Davidson (ed.) Anybody (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997), pp. 16-25.

25   Geert Bekaert, Architecture Devoid of Shadow (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1988), p. 45.