A Theater of the In-Between: Architecture and the End of the Spectator

Acknowledgements

Some of the essays in this book have been previously published: the chapter on constructivist architecture and stage design was written for the Journal of Architectural Education (November 1998), and the concluding chapter, on the engaged spectator, was written for Design Issues (1999). Both refer to research done for my dissertation (completed in 1994) which means that in addition to sharing common grant support (from IREX, the Center for Advanced Studies in the Visual Arts, and the Social Sciences Research Council), they also share certain ideas: thus, the idea of the engaged spectator, introduced in “Culture as a Battleground,” is developed more extensively in the Conclusion. The Conclusion, however, relies on (and of necessity, must reiterate in places) the more detailed discussion of constructivist narratives from the former chapter in order to make its own argument. The chapter on deconstruction and the paradigm of revelation and concealment represents a combination of new ideas and some re-thinking of an earlier article of mine on Peter Eisenman (in Twenty/One, 1990). The introduction and the chapter on the American architectural landscape are substantially new work, drawing primarily on lecture material and notes prepared for classes of mine at the University of Bucharest (American Civilization), and the Bucharest Academy of Art (Contemporary Art History and Contemporary Design History), all taught in the academic year of 1996/7. I particularly hope that some of those students will find their way to this book.

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Introduction

Although most of the chapters in this book originated in different contexts and for different reasons, two themes underlie my thinking in each: first, the presence of narratives in architecture and the illumination they shed on the particular unions between form and ideology which characterize movements and manifestations; and second, that ideology—aesthetic, political or social—may play a more determinative role in shaping a movement than form plays. I hold these ideas to prevail whether we speak of modernism or postmodernism.

In the late twentieth century, a prevalent belief has been that modernism represented an almost “dictatorial” or totalizing approach to style, design, and the world; that, in contrast, postmodernism rebelled against this by insisting on variation, cultural multiplicity, and the rights of consumers to determine their own tastes. Postmodernism is upheld—by some—as the rejection of a form of control over the environment which allowed for or admitted no deviations.

Historians and critics identified this control as arising less from political ideologies inherent to modernism than from a tendency towards exclusions, with one of the prevailing forms of exclusion being inherent to the artistic medium and process such that each art evolves toward something unitary within itself. This focus on the “purity” of the medium (which we associate with Clement Greenberg but which is, in fact, of longer standing) finds meaning only in the medium, in its materials and techniques, and overlooks the existence or the possibility of other meanings in the works created in that medium. It further overlooks the possibility of multiple explanations for a focus on the medium. Yet, these meanings and motivations are present, although they remain unacknowledged, and this forms the second area of exclusions—the existence of certain “narratives” or meanings. This understanding of modernism, as an art of exclusions and an art of totalizing control, has been challenged by recent writers about architecture and art history, with a particularly cogent example being the writing of Briony Fer.¹

Fer begins her critique with a brief look at El Lisitskii’s Abstrakt Kabinett—an exhibition room in the Hanover Museum (1926), intended for “modern spectators” who would see in a new way, with their heads turned in a different direction. This spectator, “conceived as an active participant in the staging of a modern aesthetic,” was active in that his position, or the angle of vision, as he moved through the room, created the vision he received, not merely in terms of which art works he saw but in terms of the color of the walls which were made of vertical wooden slats of black and white set against a grey wall. The room itself became a modern work of art containing other works; the museum of Lisitskii’s creation was therefore a “totalising and transformatory model of abstraction,” a staged experience built around a theme of illumination, in a physical and a metaphorical sense, as “blinders” would be removed from the eyes of spectators and they would see with a new clarity.²

This notion of opening one’s eyes to the new world, to utopia, to a new vision, was not unique either to El Lisitskii or to the Russian avant-garde; for that matter, it was not unique to painting. Fer does not make a connection to theater but one can be made, in particular to Vsevolod Meierkhol’d’s goal of revealing the schematic lines of the production of a play so that workers could become the actors; and to the constructivist goal in general of accomplishing precisely the same thing. But if Lisitskii’s controlling model of exhibition design was to elicit an active spectator, then it can be argued that its goals were contradictory and almost self-canceling. If not self-canceling, then they deliberately
foregrounded the issue of modernism as hegemonic control.

The postmodern critique of modernism was at first seen as a reaction to the presumed monolithic nature or hegemony of modernism. But given that postmodernism has been defined so variously and inconsistently, postmodern theory itself does not sustain a view of modernism as monolithic. One consistency in postmodern theory would appear to be the critique or rejection of a modernism of “grand narratives,” a modernism which centralizes a messianic utopia as the goal of design. In place of the grand narratives of modernism, postmodernism has asserted that life is a simulacrum of reality which ultimately is a simulacrum of truth. Since truth, therefore, is not immutable, if it can even be known, art cannot claim to present unequivocal truths and certainties. Assertions such as these have challenged the image of modernism as the imposition of a hegemonic cultural system, allowing the recognition of multiple versions of modernism, and within modernism, recognition of the presence of dualities.

If we turn, for example, to Russian constructivism, we find a duality between the machine and folk art, or, in more metaphorical terms, between a carnivalesque magical machine and dynamo or turbine. For a time, these directions seem to unite; then they diverge. De Stijl, a spiritual and utopian order of design, initially seems to allow for no dualities, but the core of design is a symbolic duality between the horizontal and the vertical, which metaphorically becomes a duality between the real and the unbuilt. Writing about Piet Mondrian, Fer has suggested that the dialectic in his work concerns a line between the profane or secular and the sacred, which at times can be read as one between art and decoration; the dialectic is expressed almost as a sort of dance as Mondrian searches within his language for what can be left in and what must be excised. To Carl Einstein, the dialectic was something other: between the pure and the impure, between the pretension to a controlling utopia and regression to the primitive. Thus, for Einstein the mathematical vision of Mondrian (who denied that it was mathematical) was totalitarian in its vision but driven by the same fears which motivated primitive rituals: “anxiety before the invisible and before the sudden disappearance by death.” Einstein does not contest the totalization of this art; he does contest its positioning as a utopian vision.

Bruno Taut centralized a dialectic between expressionist, symbolist thinking and an activist orientation to art and architecture; or, in terms of the foregoing discussion, we might describe it as a dialectic in which the dialectical utopianism of Mondrian stands on one side, and the conflicted activism of constructivism stands on the other. The activist side is represented to a large extent by Taut’s belief that a new architecture can create a new society and culture (later in his career he will be involved in the design and building of housing projects, but the activist side is present in his most expressionist works, including his book Alpine Architecture.) Alpine Architecture to a large extent reflected the influence of Paul Scheerbart and his book on glass architecture. Glass architecture will transform society, wrote Scheerbart, but this idea was not new; it goes back to the Old Testament, but over time the crystal became a symbol of individual transcendence. Scheerbart re-associated it with social change and architecture. In Alpine Architecture, Taut essentially illustrated the idea that glass architecture could change the world. Each page is a watercolor painting or an ink wash drawing of the Alps transformed into glass architecture. The spirituality of the text which accompanies the paintings bears some influence of Kandinsky. And the final statement made by Taut in the book, about the sublime and transcendent value of crystal architecture, seems to be a link to the early Bauhaus statements of purpose, especially the original brochure with its print by Feininger of what appears to be a crystal cathedral. But this crystalline image of the Alps, with its allusions to Kandinsky, to medieval illuminations, to the Bible, and to a future world of glass architecture, is nothing if not a rationalized fantasy of Paradise. Rationalized, but unlike either the Russian utopia or
the American, it is not mechanized.

A split which somewhat parallels the Russian split can be found in the design of the Third Reich. Two tendencies co-existed during the Third Reich: an industrial modernism and a traditional, more crafts-oriented direction. In a sense, this polarization recapitulates the split between the German gesamtkunstwerk direction and its rejection of the early 1900s, a split fundamental to the formation of the Werkbund. Standardization in design related to some extent to Taylorism but its implications went beyond production—just as in Russian constructivism, the efficient and standardized design was expected to exert a standardizing and moralizing (in psychological and economic terms) effect on users of the standardized product and environment.

As standardization and mass-production became more prevalent, designers often turned their attention to superficial differences between products—this related to the production of consumer goods and a changed view of the consumer, who became less of a participant in a rational process and more of a passive purchaser who succumbs to artifice and fantasy. Yet, this side of design was not the crafts or archaic side; it resulted from modernized production and therefore was part of the modernist side.

A crafts working class continues to be active in inter-war Germany and sees itself as the perpetrators of a true German heritage—guilds were reinstated with Nazi power but large industrial concerns were threatened by the possibility of return to middle-class production concepts. They established their base in the production of a large military industry which in turn gave the non-military technical industry a greater power base, with implications for design, some in not fully expected ways: for example, Thonet and Bauhaus steel-tubing furniture could not be made because steel was needed for military production which had priority.

In both cases, technological industry and crafts organizations, purpose dominated over methods—a factor which tends to equalize the two forms of industrial design—but purpose was not always inherent to the design. In the case of materials availability, purpose came from conditions external to the design process, but these conditions themselves agitated for the use of forms and materials which communicated a particular meaning. It is in this respect that design during this period was political or propagandistic.

In the United States, we find a dialectic between romanticism and international style modernism (a dialectic which can also be found in Scandinavian countries such as Finland, for example). Working from the premise that the International style is now recognized as one form of modernism in architecture, and that with this recognition, other early 20th century styles can also be called "manifestations of the modern," Wendy Kaplan suggests that because California had a tradition of a developing regionalism which tended to incorporate ideas from modernism as part of regionalist trends, the appearance of the modern on the west coast was more variable, more synthetic, and more individualistic than it was on the east coast. In her model, then, Frank Lloyd Wright can almost be taken as the paradigmatic example of west coast modernism. His goal of integrating the building with the landscape aligns him with Irving Gill and with California revivalism, and sets him at odds with European modernism. In the Hollyhock/Barnsdall house, he seems to violate some of his own beliefs, in the siting of the house and the inaccessible fireplace. The house is more fortress-like than his prairie style houses, but it could be argued that the allusion to a Mayan fortress makes an allusion to a regional, revivalist vernacular which serves to integrate the house more than a prairie style house would have been in this setting. All his California houses share this fortress-like massing and image, which would argue for perceiving the form as Wright's conception of the appropriate match between landscape and building in southern California. The fortress-like look also comes from the use of concrete blocks which serve Wright in the dual capacity of ornament and structure—a modernist statement but made here in materials that contradict the modern/international style image.
In both east coast and west coast modern, it is in the attitude toward the machine and nature that fundamental differences with the International Style emerge: this is an attitude which accepts machine imagery and technology but integrates it with nature, a position which is a fundamental component of the American myth of the “machine in the garden.” The “machine in the garden” is itself a dialectic, one which expresses the duality of the European myth of America as paradise and the American myth of the rugged individual, the dialectic of the pioneer versus the puritan, a dynamic which underlay American culture almost from its inception.

One reason for the presence of dualities in these and other forms of modernism is the existence of more than one cultural system: a dominant culture and a residual culture, or a dominant culture and one which is emerging. During the time when these cultures co-exist, a state of liminality or transition characterizes society. Liminality and transition are not identical, however; transition implies active and chosen movement but liminality does not. Movement may be the outcome, but stasis is more likely the reality. This uncertainty, though, makes theater a potent metaphor for the process of design, in architecture and in the micro-environment.

If we think of this process as theater, as the creation of stage sets for political life, for social life, and for personal life, then we must also think of this theater in a postmodern sense, as a happening, because the outcome is not known from the start and cannot always be anticipated. This is theater which is dominated by change and inconstancy. And the stage sets change as well. It is theater as a perpetually changing machine, theater as the “desiring machine” of Deleuze and Guatteri. But the questions which must be asked of this theater are these: what drama is being staged? Who are the protagonists? What role is expected of the spectator? And finally, is there an ending to this drama?

Alternatively, a different metaphor, in place of theater, is chaos. Instead of a world which is quantifiable, measurable, lacking in ambiguity, we have a world in which linear dynamics are only one type of movement, while non-linear and non-proportional movement is the norm. The implication of this is not far from that of the theatrical metaphor: there are multiple viewpoints which must be accounted for in order to study the phenomenon of design; these phenomena are, in themselves, models of complexity and they exist in a world of complexity. And we have a world, or worlds, which, if they presume to offer a vision of utopia, it must be a vision which is expressed in dialogic, not hegemonic, terms. We will see that this is true of the constructivist vision of utopia, and may have underlain its demise; we will have reason to question this when we turn to recent American utopian expressions.

Architectural Narratives
The term “narrative” has come up, primarily in the context of postmodernism’s rejection of the “grand narratives” of modernism. What are these grand narratives, and, more generally, what does it mean to speak of narratives in architecture? The “grand narratives” of modernism are usually taken to be narratives of power: the power of science and knowledge to determine the future, in conjunction with the power to develop new science and knowledge for this goal; narratives of cultural or political hegemony which will impose order and rationality on a world of disorder; the presence of an origin and a center, the presence of a creator. These are the narratives which we have seen and will see challenged by further exegeses of modernism.

Support for a reading of narratives in the visual arts largely comes from history, psychology, and art criticism. In history, for example, Hayden White defines narrative as
the imposition of moral judgement, legitimacy, and authority on events which are otherwise presented as a listing without hierarchy or attached significance, in the form of annals, or taken the next step and organized as a chronicle by their relationship to a unifying subject--person or place or event--but still told without closure or assessment. It is the presence of narrative which confers the closure of truth on the chronicle and the coherence of moral authority on annals, and it is the obligation of the historian to impose the narrative. But it is also the obligation of the reader of history to recognize that a narrative has been imposed; that truth and closure and moral authority do not inhere in the events of real life; that the world does not come to us with a narrative in place. Yet, the narrative is not fiction, either: its content is the content of history and the narrative is not the creation of content so much as it is the mode of discourse or representation. When the narrative is conflated with its content, it transcends narrative to become ideology, either through the discourse of the historian or the interpretation of the reader.6

There is some congruency between White's sense of a historical narrative and Craig Owens' identification of an "allegorical impulse" in postmodernism.7 Owens defines the allegory as a representation in which a superficial sense parallels and illustrates a deeper sense, with the model of a palimpsest as the paradigm for the allegory. As a narrative, the allegory serves a function which is comparable to the historian's narrative: it imposes a form of order and coherence on events or images that have a prior existence but either lack coherence or explicit and authoritative meaning.

Calling for psychology to reunite with cultural studies, Jerome Bruner suggests an approach to understanding narrative which begins with the individual but responds to cultural expectations.8 Narrative, in Bruner's framework, is the construction of meaning in an individual's life. This meaning is constrained by culture and biology, so the narrative functions, in essence, as a mediator between personal and cultural dynamics, or between the idiosyncratic actions of an individual and cultural norms. Following from this, the purpose of the narrative is not to explain the usual or the ordinary in someone's life but the exceptional--to provide reasons which mitigate exceptionality: "The function of the story is to find an intentional state [which can come from something within the culture, like a national expectation, or within the person] that mitigates or at least makes comprehensible a deviation from a canonical cultural pattern."9 It is in this way that the narrative becomes a mediator between person and culture, and that the narrative illuminates culture.

Even from this brief overview, we can see that taken together, the implications of this literature for a definition of narrative are two-fold: structural and substantive. A narrative may be discontinuous or fragmentary, and it is not inherently subjected to or reflective of a chronological or linear framework or pattern. Its content is likely to be an idiosyncratic interpretation of reality with the intention of conferring an explanatory, sense-making, or moral authority on events which might otherwise appear disjunctive and to exist in a moral vacuum. It is as a communicative action which imparts meaning or meanings to events which appear disordered that narrative takes form, and because the nature of its raw content is likely to be multiplicitous, chaotic, disorderly, or complex, the narrative is equally likely to be marked by those qualities.

Although architecture can seem the most defiantly nonverbal of the visual arts, narrative, in fact, is there almost from the inception and it is implicit to the very act of giving space meaning. Space exists prior to the imposition of architecture--architecture gives space a history, makes it into a constructed place; in this sense, architecture conveys a narrative and is a narrative in itself. From studies of prehistoric and primitive architecture, we find that the earliest and most basic of architectural narratives concern creation as a religious act, metaphors for the cosmos and life and death, and the house itself often becomes a metaphor or image of the world, in miniature. These almost primordial narratives have lasting value, to the effect that designers can today deliberately
imbue a place with a metaphorical sacred quality through formal, contextual, and ritualistic associations. For architectural ritual, we have only to think of Stonehenge, a monument in which not only was the act of construction a ritual, but the place existed as a site for ritual. The earliest architectural impulses were not the need for shelter, but the goal of setting boundaries and creating spaces for ritual, and the creation of monuments.

After ritual and property delineation, the urbanization of humanity provides the next major impetus for architectural creations and narratives. The city is not a singular structure or monument; it has more accurately been described as an organism which constantly changes. Structurally, it consists of a network of smaller structures which enable and shelter various functions, and through the connecting tissue, the links holding these structures together, we find the creation of public spaces and the manifestation of ideas about how the overall environment should support the community.

Jericho is one of the earliest cities known, dating to about 8000 BCE. A fortified settlement, it was surrounded by a ditch and walls which, as is common knowledge, came tumbling down after Joshua fought the battle of Jericho. Two things in particular make Jericho of interest. For one, there were no streets—courtyards and left-over spaces formed the system of communication. Another system of communication existed as well—from the earthly to the dead and to the other world. Corpses were buried underneath houses, a fact which suggests the existence of an ancestor cult and which imbues this early urban plan with a religious narrative.

Art and images have been used as a means of magic and ritual control over the world from almost the very beginning of what we know of culture, from the Paleolithic caves through the neolithic era. What we find in the period of history, as distinct from pre-history, and with the Sumerians, is a more definitive religion of gods personifying the forces of good and of evil, the forces of nature, and gods who respond to human attempts to control their environment and must therefore be worshiped; their needs must be satisfied by these worshipers. This need to satisfy and appease the god leads to a more highly developed form of religious structures.

The Sumerian city plan was at first dominated by the temple which formed the heart or core of the plan. The temple, before the existence of separate administrative centers, also filled that role, and the supreme god, in some respects, who was believed to own the city, was seen as the chief administrator. All the townspeople consequently devoted their lives to fulfilling the needs of the god, and the temple even functioned as a mercantile or commercial, economic center of the city. But the structure of course served a highly symbolic role, lifting up the god over the roofs of the city. The ziggurat was the platform for the temple, but it evolved into a structure that merged the platform with the temple. In a sense, it was a glorified staircase for the use of the god, to facilitate his ascent every night to the heavens where they went to sleep. Of human beings, only priests were permitted access to the highest levels. Another role played by the ziggurat temple was that of a landmark—the highest structure in the built and unbuilt environment, it announced the presence of civilization amid the fields and marshlands. The high temple, or ziggurat temple structure, created a different experience from that of the low urban temple. Instead of a god who resided deep within a labyrinthine type of structure, here the god was raised up above the city and symbolized, in the god's earthly home, the union of earth and heaven. A built mountain, the inner recesses of the earth were symbolically joined to the eternal expanse of the universe and the heavens. So we find in this structure a true setting for ritual and the expression of magical/religious beliefs in the built environment.

In Sumerian art we find increasing evolution and differentiation of cultural forms, and this differentiation extends to architecture as well, with particular implications for religious architecture and the centrality of the ziggurat. Over time, the ziggurat becomes less important, or at least multiplies to the extent that it loses the power that derives from being
a unique setting in the city. The building form that takes over this power is the palace, and the king in turn assumes the central importance once held by the chief deity. Simultaneously, the palace becomes the locus of art, an art more dedicated to the commemoration of the monarch than to religion, and the city itself becomes an economic and military machine dominated by the palace, the engine of this machine. The palace as economic, military, and political center, imbued with the lingering aura of the gods: this is a metaphor, image, and narrative which has not been dislodged easily because narrative is a mythic mode, a symbolic approach to understanding the environment and conferring meaning on a place, creating a sense of attachment and value and importance which extends over time and exceeds an individual person's attachment to place even as it serves to explain the meaning of a place for a group or culture. This is not necessarily an objective response and often has the qualities of a religious or quasi-religious attachment to place.

I have sketched this evolution of architectural narratives and forms from the religious to the political because it would appear to underlie a reverse evolution in 20th century totalitarian architecture, in which political buildings which never had a religious aura attached to them become the center of a new type of religion: political theocracy. But there is another reason for examining this evolution: as much of east Europe has moved from communist to non-communist regimes, land use has become destabilized and space has become de-architecturalized. Irena Fialova describes these liminal underused pockets of land: "In Prague, we find, apart from common terrain vague areas like old, abandoned industrial and railway complexes, unused stretches of land around highways, and no man’s land around large centrally planned housing complexes, special cases of terrain vague, found right in the centre, which are the consequences of the disconnected town planning process and nationalized property by the communist regime in 1948 and the recent restitution of private ownership after 1989." She goes on to describe current approaches to architectural planning—a continuation of the socialist style, with some modification; imitation of the architecture of countries which remained outside the sphere of communist influence; and an attempt to return to and resume the style which existed before the imposition of communism, essentially the functionalist modernism of the thirties—but observes that generally these approaches are likely to fail the terrain vague areas because such areas have a historic character which makes them resistant to new uses.

But it is through the imposition of narrative that this resistance might be overcome, and in this respect, Iris Aravot's analysis of "narrative-myths" in urban design and architecture assumes particular relevance. Of special interest is her connection of narrative to myth and religion, thereby imparting a sacred or mythic quality to a place but through a narrative that is shaped and imposed by the designer. In contrast to a more traditional use of narrative, in which the designer essentially translates or interprets a literary source into built form, Aravot argues that urban design necessitates the use of a narrative which addresses life and changes in life both over time and over an extended geographic realm. A narrative-myth may be developed a posteriori, or after the design and its realization have been effected; it then serves to explain or impose meaning on the realized design and patterns of use associated with it. This is a narrative-myth, even if created after the city has been created, because it "interweaves a motivated set of values with an imaginative conceptual order imposed on established facts and processes....it imposes meaning specifically on what is still inexplicable." Conversely, a myth may precede the design--an a priori myth--and in this case it implies the design as well as the experiences which will emerge after the design is implemented. The a priori urban narrative-myth "is based on an exalted ideological concept that precedes any practical confrontation with actual situations." A priori myths can be discovered through research and investigation of demographic patterns, descriptive studies of districts in a city, observations and interviews and examination of printed and graphic materials; these pre-existing stories can then be
supplemented by the creative work of the designer.

We therefore find today that there are three realms for understanding narrative or myth in architecture: an investigation which establishes relationships between architecture and myth in terms of particular places and particular functions/goals/building types; an investigation of the role which can be played (and has been played) by myth in the design process; and an examination of the myths or narratives which are imposed after the design by various users or publics.

If the reader has perceived that my introduction and the following essays seek to erase the differences between modernism and postmodernism, that would be a correct reading. I want to suggest that the postmodern centralization of the spectator and performance as a metaphor can be found in the constructivist vision of the modern, and that not only the strategies but almost all the narratives of postmodernism have antecedents in modernism, but that by the late twentieth century these narratives have become attenuated to the point of predicting a dearchitecturalization of the environment and the disembodiment of the human being. If, from this brief overview of narratives and modernism, we identify the narratives of architecture as consisting of an expression of architecture as a spiritual painting of utopia; architecture as dispersal, motion, and the creation of a liminal space between machine and carnival; architecture as consumer product and ideological statement; and architecture as the fusion of the ordinary, the familiar, and the unreal, then we have identified the dynamics which will converge in the “grand narrative” of postmodernism: a narrative of identity and the loss of identity, of absence and presence—a narrative of trauma.


2. Fer, both quotations: p. 1.

3. Based on Fer’s discussion, pp. 2-3.


