

REVIEW

The Eyes of Objects

Carsten Thau: *Arkitekturen som tidsmaskine*. Copenhagen: Kunstakademiets arkitektskoles forlag, 2010. 560 pp. ISBN 978-87-7830-237-3

Opening a book is like arriving in a city, and opening the 560 lavishly illustrated pages of Carsten Thau's (CT) book on architecture as a time-machine, is like arriving in the most labyrinthine city of all times. According to the mood and mind of the reader, this is a book that rouses expectations between illumination and illusion. As a reader you get a feeling comparable to the feeling experienced by CT when he arrives in Venice: He leaves his safe hotel to walk towards the Piazza San Marco, where he "tries to find a foothold on the big floor of the city, makes a pirouette and some sweeping gestures." This could even be taken as a description of the approach of CT to the many and very diverse subjects of the book: He starts by locating his topic in space and time, positions himself in relation to the subject, invests his full sensibility, makes the reader hold his breath while CT is looking for a point of balance, until the reader starts breathing again, confident that this is a writer who due to his great and prodigious knowledge is capable of these kinds of sweeping gestures.

In his essay on Venice, Minotaurus on the Market-place, CT gives a spell-binding demonstration of his skills as an analyst of architecture and culture. All levels are woven together. Here we find the close, phenomenological level with acute registrations of light, sounds, surfaces, textures. Here we find the distant, historical level with its erudite information on the history and meaning of the labyrinth. And here we find the interplay between concretion and abstraction in the eye-opening description of how Venice has been shaped by two systems, the canals and the streets, tied in the elegant bow of Canal Grande.

Any walk through the labyrinth of Venice is always "impregnated" by literature, CT notes, and he walks in the company of writers such as Thomas Mann, Joseph Brodsky, Gabriele d'Annunzio, Filippo Marinetti, Jorge Luis Borges, Walt Disney, Walter Benjamin. As a "literary city" Venice has a special appeal to CT who was an historian of ideas before he became a specialist on architecture. Every corner of the city seems to

spark off a number of philosophical and literary associations, and even if he writes that on certain “averted” nights one senses the lurking presence of Minotaurus in the labyrinth of Venice, the fact is, that as a reader you never fear that CT is going to lose his footing. Indeed, this is an excellent example of cultural analysis.

The 23 essays of the book are divided into seven groups. The first three groups primarily deal with space, from “dwelling” via “Paris “ to “the collector”; the following three groups deal with time, from “the time of the labyrinth” to “the avant-garde” and further on to “the human automaton”. The final group – “after-time” - show how space and time, exteriors and interiors are woven together in contemporary and almost-contemporary works by Bernard Tschumi, Mies van der Rohe, Olafur Eliasson and Richard Meier. The sweeping gesture is the water-mark of this book. The title of the concluding essay may give an impression of this: “The celestial sphere – the macro-interior – the house of the world.”

In the chapters on “dwelling” it is striking, that CT is most interested in the unfamiliar or unsettling aspects of the home. Sigmund Freud once wrote a thought-provoking essay on “das Unheimliche” or “the uncanny”, and Anthony Vidler has shown how this concept and this feeling applies to architecture. CT, however, also analyses the uncanny in paintings, especially in a close-“reading” of John Singer Sargent’s portrait of the daughters of the art-collector Edward Darley Boit. As a qualified guide into the labyrinths of the bourgeois family, CT shows how the uncanny comes creeping into the motive, in the composition, in choice of colours etc.

In the chapters on Paris, this subject reappears in CT’s pointing out how the exterior world enters the sphere of intimacy, and how this causes a destabilisation of the senses. One becomes the victim of what is termed “the never-ending vibrations of the street.” The Impressionistic representations of the Parisian boulevards are interpreted as symptoms of a completely new relation to the surrounding world, a mental life characterized by abstraction, anonymity and nervousness. Both time and space are “invaded”, and time is laid waste in the nervous short-circuit between the present and the future. As to the colour of black that forces its way into the boulevards in the paintings of Pissarro and Manet, CT suggests that his may be interpreted as a fusion of metaphor and perception: man becomes identified with his shadow; modern dynamism is a carrier of death.

Collecting is interpreted as a way of evading death, and the chapters on collectors have their central point in the analysis of the house of John Soanes as an intimate world theatre in the middle of London. In the

chapter on “the magical object” CT reflects upon the mania for collecting from a philosophical perspective, taking as his point of departure Walter Benjamin’s concept of aura and his highly suggestive image of objects looking back at their beholder.

In his essay on John Soanes CT presents this architect-plus-collector as an eccentric who established laboratories for his play with objects, a play displayed in “adventurous travels” and “productive montages” connecting even the most distant and diverse objects. CT’s own way of building up his essays may be compared to the collector. As a collector he stacks up word upon word, object upon object, observation upon observation, in such a way that it makes the reader experience not only dizzying intellectual loops, but also highly illuminating ones. Only rarely does one discover associations which are not precise. One such is the characterization of Roy Batty’s poetry as “heavy metal poetry” in the Ridley Scott’s cult-movie *Blade Runner*. The verses on “Fiery the angels fell etc” have not been written by Metallica, but by William Blake, in *America: A Prophecy* (1793), but with the twist that Blake made the angels rise, not fall.

The chapter on *Blade Runner* is part of the group of essays on labyrinthine time, and per definition labyrinths entice people into losing their ways. In the following part on the avant-garde it is not the labyrinth but the bridge that governs the account, here the bridge between the present and the future. The avant-garde is examined in four chapters going from Russian constructivism to Bauhaus ending up with the masterpiece of Mies van der Rohe: Die Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin. According to Le Corbusier only donkeys use detours whereas rational human beings prefer the shortest way between two points. However, what is exciting about CT’s analysis of the avant-garde, is his keen eye for all the oblique and unexpected connections beneath the rational and transparent surface. He is not afraid of introducing his analysis of Neue Nationalgalerie by stating that this is “a contemporary instance of German profundity”, and he qualifies this statement with highly interesting reflections on the aesthetics of transparency.

Another interesting point in the analysis of Neue National Galerie is the reference to Nietzsche and his *Beyond Good and Evil*. CT suggests that the formal and impersonal perfection of the museum may be interpreted as a reflection of Mies van der Rohe’s intense reading of this work.

Less convincing is the deep contrast between Neue Nationalgalerie and the Altes Museum by Karl Friedrich Schinkel. CT claims that Schinkel’s museum is characterized by “hermetism” and “introversion”, but is

that really true? Schinkel had taken a lot of inspiration from the aesthetics of the panorama, and in his drawing of museum-visitors enjoying the exhibits, he has also drawn a visitor who is just about to fall over the railing on top of the magnificent staircase leading up to and into the museum: In fact, the room at the top of the staircase also functions as a viewing platform where the visitors could enjoy the panorama of the new Berlin created by Schinkel himself.

In his chapters on “the human automaton” CT once again takes up topics belonging to the region of the bizarre, the curious, and the weird. But even the very eccentric phenomena he deals with in these chapters turn out to have a central position in contemporary culture – as precursors of robots, cyborgs etc. In the account of New York Dada, the whole question of machine aesthetics is taken up, and CT makes a number of eye-opening observations of this phenomenon so significant in modern culture. The Danish multi-artist Storm P. once wrote of “unguarded moments leading to comparative images”, and he made it his specialty to search for these images in an absurd world of apparatuses. One would love to read an essay on Storm P. by Thau.

The book on the architectural time-machine ends up with 5 chapters on the interplay between modernity and metaphysics in contemporary art and architecture and what lies somewhere in-between. A rather dry, but informative chapter on the deconstructivist Parc de la Villette by Bernard Tschumi is followed by a chapter on Olafur Eliasson, alternating between wild associations and precise observations. Eliasson’s focus on the senso-motoric dimension in architecture obviously appeals to CT’s own sense of the tactile in art and architecture. The concept of structural transparency seems to be a very interesting way of conceiving this dimension:

The sensibility, that is developed in contemporary man, increasingly includes the very code for objects and organisms, their genetic structure. [...] One may dare predict that this mode of experience, this new, hallucinating transparency in the physical world, will develop even further up through the 21st century. (p.461)

In the last chapter CT uses Richard Meier’s museum for the Peace Altar of Augustus to provide a new reflection on his favourite topics. We hear about the echo between Antiquity and Modernity, we learn about the interplay between opacity and transparency, we examine the exchanges between exterior and interior spaces. If one should pinpoint a general theme in this cornucopia of essays and articles, I would suggest the theme

of “cosmic domestication”, a process starting with the first cave painters, taken up by Plato in his parable of the cave, materialised in the Pantheon and still present in modern museums. The book itself is a contribution to this domestication. At the end of the book the reader certainly feels more at home in the world, in “the house of being.” Or rather: the reader is taken out of his small home of conventional wisdom, on adventurous travels which may make him familiar with a larger world. Whether he feels perfectly at home in the larger world is unimportant. As CT puts it: Alienation may have productive effects.

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