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NEOPLATONIC AESTHETICS

Music, Literature, & the Visual Arts

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Neoplatonic Origins of Postmodern Art and Architecture

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Introduction

Art and architecture of the Renaissance as much as Postmodern art and architecture searched for identity in a turn to the past. In both eras emphasis was given to the intermediate space between archetype and work. This intermediate space acquired a particular significance in Neoplatonic philosophy, which was expressed in Renaissance art and architecture, while it became the principal space in the development of philosophy and art during the Postmodern period. We will attempt an approach to this intermediate space, first in Neoplatonic philosophy and Renaissance art and architecture, and then in contemporary philosophy and art.

The first reference to this space in philosophy occurs in Plato's *Timaeus*, where things have a twofold existence: as ideas on the one hand and as sensible images of the ideas, *eidola*, on the other. The *idea* of a particular thing is its absolute form and it exists in the eternal world of the ideas. Between these two genres of being, the ideas and their sensible images, argues the *Timaeus*, there is a third kind of being, a third genre, *chora*. *Chora* is the reception of every birth, something like a mother or nurse, who takes all that becomes into herself without assimilating any of the characteristics of the entering beings. She is in a constant movement and transformation in order to give form to everything sensible.[1] *Chora* is not approachable by logical or mythical thinking but by a kind of inauthentic reasoning, which is like dreaming. *Chora* receives the four so-called elements—fire, water, air and earth—which existed before the creation and already had a mathematical structure. Within the *chora*, the demiurge undertakes the creation of the particulars from the four elements, according to their *idea* or paradigm and mathematical harmony.[2]

In this essay, we conceive of the Postmodern as a reference to the rupture within the ontological dimension of the thing, both metaphysical and secular.

We will argue that the first instances of the focus on this reference in art and architecture occur in the Renaissance, in the Neoplatonic tradition.

An Approach to Neoplatonism

The Neoplatonists' interest in the philosophy of art goes back to the beginning of Greek philosophy. Plato is the central figure in their investigation. As Plato states in *Ion*, art consists of the cognitive procedure that controls and brings into being the results of the poet's inspiration.[3] The Greek term for beauty, *kalon*, was never distinguished from the moral good. It was associated with arts but only in a very general sense.[4] When Plato discusses beauty in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, he is not referring to works of art but to human persons, in the sense of natural beauty, beauty of the soul and beauty of cognition without distinction.[5]

The finite nature of the particulars caused their principles, the ideas, to be connected with numbers. Plato's argument about the relation of the ideas to numbers originates in the Pythagorean principle of Unity and the Dyad or Limit and Unlimited. The all-embracing principle of Unity must be limited, in order that it is reproduced in the individual nature. This is why the Pythagorean principle of goodness and order was identified with Limit, as contrasted with the principle of disorder, the Unlimited. Order consisted in harmonic numerical ratios defining the analogy between whole and parts. Every particular thing derives by the action of the Limit upon the Unlimited.[6]

Plato, in the *Philebus,* dealing with the limited nature of individual things, identifies measure and proportion with the essence of things, or with beauty and truth, or with the *Idea* of the Good: "...for measure and proportion are everywhere identified with beauty and virtue...Then if we cannot catch the *good* with the aid of one idea, let us run it down to three—beauty, proportion, truth."[7] Harmony, rhythm, balance, proportion, and symmetry are all expressions of beauty in this sense.

Despite the fact that the metaphysical categories of Plato were well anchored in the realm of social reality, his separation between the social and the ideal paved the way for the ultimately mystical speculations of Neoplatonism. In Neoplatonic philosophy too, the concept of beauty, as well as the associated concept of art, was of the first importance. The metaphysics of beauty, which Plotinus elaborated, has had the most profound influence on generations of artists, philosophers and critics.

In the *Enneads*, Plotinus alludes to the unity between finite things and the ultimate harmony of the One, through the notions of emanation and symbol. Thus the beauty of finite things is an emanation of infinite Beauty, which in turn is an emanation from the Good of the intellect. In this way, a beautiful object becomes a symbol of cosmic harmony. Works of art stand between the incomplete beauties of nature, which they perfect, and beauty itself, which is approachable by the mind alone. Thus art is a symbol as much of the lower reality of nature, as of the ultimate reality of the divine. In fact, it provides the unity between the two. In this sense, a statue, more than being an image which imitates an archetypal *idea*, constitutes a symbol of the absolute and is unified with the whole universe. The symbolic nature of art receives its first comprehensive development in the philosophy of Plotinus.[8]

While in the philosophy of Plotinus beauty enjoys its highest transcendental status, in Augustine's teachings it becomes a property of God's creation: in *De Ordine*, the Plotinian emanations are transformed into God's divine harmonies. Reality now is found to lie within the mind. The role of art and beauty is fundamental, since art represents one of the deepest and most characteristic activities of the spirit, while beauty represents one of its most deeply desired objectives. Furthermore, Augustine's philosophy of art is more properly a philosophy of beauty. In *De Ordine*, under the influence of Pythagoras, Plato and Plotinus, beauty has a mathematical foundation. Its prerequisites are unity and equality or resemblance. Unity is the fundamental principle of a thing's existence. It is based on harmony among the parts and between parts and whole. Equality or resemblance constitutes the source of analogy, measure and number.[9]

In Augustine's conception of the relation between the work of art and its archetype, imitation does not play an important role. As he relates in *De Musica*, "animals imitate but they have not art."[10] Besides, allegorical interpretation becomes the way of revealing absolute truth. Allegory exists in favor of the unity between idea and things. Throughout Medieval times, one of the dominant interests of the Neoplatonists was the allegorical interpretation of ancient myths and stories.

During the Renaissance, Marsilio Ficino attempted an allegorical interpretation of Plato's dialogues, in order to bring out the "concealed" meaning. In his *Commentary on Plato's Symposium,* Ficino seeks the true nature of beauty. The movement to intelligible beauty is by way of visible beauty. The expression of the formal properties of the objects according to thought and the senses constitutes the task of art, in the path from the lower to the higher

beauty. In Ficino's words: "light, gracefulness, proportion, number and measure, which we apprehend by thought, vision and hearing (are the beautiful)."[11] The motivating power of the search for beauty is love.[12] In Ficino's universe, the work of art is conceived as an extension of the physical world in empirical terms, at the expense of its direct connection to the divine and the metaphysical. The continuum between the physical and the divine worlds, however, is not yet broken.

Renaissance Art and Architecture

Principles

Under the influence of Neoplatonic philosophy, Renaissance art and architecture will be discussed as an outcome of the following principles:

1. The *idea* as a metaphysical entity becomes principally abstract at the expense of its meaning as form.
2. The archetype of a work of art or architecture consists of two parts: first, the *idea* as an abstract entity and, second, Classical art and architecture as well as nature.
3. Allegory as the intermediate factor, which connects *idea* with form, acquires an increasing significance in comparison with the two ends of the procedure.
4. Mathematical relations deriving from Pythagoras and Plato constitute the main tool of allegory in this sense, as far as they claim absolute value as carriers of a "certain truth."

Here, the term allegory bears the meaning of the connection between two heterogeneous entities: the metaphysical ideas of the Neoplatonic tradition on the one hand, and Classical art and architecture as well as nature approached by an empirical attitude on the other. Thus, allegory becomes the name of unity between two entities, which originally were not united—Classical philosophy and Classical art and architecture—and had a totally different meaning from that ascribed to them by the Renaissance. Renaissance artists, though, believed that their art was a revival of Classical art and that it expressed absolute truth in the way that Classical art did.

Idea and Form

In Renaissance art and architecture, theory becomes—for the first time in history—the basis of the existence of the work. In fact, only through theory can the work enjoy existence as much in the absolute as in the corporeal world. Theory has undertaken the task of re-establishing the lost unity between form and the absolute. A work cannot exist without a theoretical support any more. Thus, we could argue, Renaissance theory of art and architecture originates in the fundamental need for re-unifying form with the absolute.

Beauty and Ornament

Alberti, in his *De re aedificatoria,* declares that the aesthetic appearance of a building consists of two elements: beauty and ornament. He defines beauty as "the harmony and concord of all parts achieved in such a manner that nothing could be added or taken away or altered except for the worse."[13] Ornament is "a kind of additional brightness and improvement to beauty. Beauty is something lovely which is proper and innate and diffused throughout the whole, whilst ornament is something added and fastened on, rather than proper and innate." Alberti emphasizes that "the principal ornament in all architecture certainly lies in the column."[14] By considering the column, which is the main element of Classical architecture, as the principal ornament, Alberti seems to reduce the whole of Classical architecture to the category of ornament. Thus Classical architecture becomes secondary in the expression of the *idea*, after mathematical harmony. Only through mathematical harmony can Classical form participate in the *idea*.

Dismemberment and Unity

In the Renaissance, Classical forms, as much as forms of nature, approached in empirical terms, are dismembered and re-organized. Unity is expressed by allegory in the sense discussed above, with mathematical harmony as well as symbolic allegory as its principal tools. On the cover of his *Quattro libri dell'architectura*, Palladio stresses the allegorical relation between Classical form and the idea of *Virtus* (Virtue), through mathematical harmony.[15]

Alberti, in *De pictura*, treats the work of art as an extension of nature, while through its mundane representations the divine is drawn rather towards the phenomenal world. Mathematical relations and perspective, as well as the *istoria*—a narrative based on the Aristotelian myth, which interprets themes taken from Classical mythology through the filter of Christian and Neoplatonic allegory—constitute the means of unity within the work.[16] This particular collage/montage, aimed at unity through allegory, is used by Renaissance artists in several ways. Domenico Veneziano's *San Giovanni in the Desert* (1445) constitutes an allegory for the renunciation of all mundane vanities. At the same time, *San Giovanni* recalls Praxiteles' *Hermes*, a reference alien to the Christian tradition in painting. Sandro Botticelli's *Primavera* (1475–8) could be considered as an allegory for Marsilio Ficino's philosophical teachings. Zephyr, Chloris, Flora, Amor, Natural Venus, Celestial Venus, the Three Graces and Hermes are united through the allegorical action of bringing forth the spiritual moment. In Raphael's *School of Athens* (1510), the unfinished Saint Peter's, designed according to the rules of perspective, provides the whole of Western philosophy—since the time of the Presocratics—with spatio-temporal unity in an allegorical sense.

Considering the case of architecture, we have already discussed that in Alberti's *De re aedificatoria*, beauty is defined through mathematical harmonic relations among the parts and between parts and the whole. During his renovation of the façade of Santa Maria Novella (1458–70), Alberti introduced new elements such as the columns, the pediment, the attic, and the scrolls, which, as Wittkower argues, "would remain isolated features were it not for that all-pervading harmony which formed the basis and background of his whole theory."[17] A single system of proportion permeates the front, resulting in the first Renaissance façade.[18] A reference to the Pantheon is obvious.

Beside mathematical allegory, the other route towards unity for Renaissance architects was symbolic allegory. Following are some examples. The dome becomes the principal symbol of Renaissance architecture and crowns Gothic and Classical churches alike: Brunelleschi's dome for Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence (1420–34) constitutes the first instance of new architecture. In *De re aedificatoria*, Alberti justifies his preference for round forms in sacred architecture based on nature's love for the circle. Nature, as understood by Alberti, "aspires to absolute perfection, she is the best and divine teacher of all things."[19]

The temple front is another example. Renaissance architects had difficulty in applying the Classical temple front—with its simple portico and pediment—to the basilica, with its high nave and the lower aisles. Both Alberti and Palladio devised solutions to the problem. Alberti applied the triumphal arch at the front of his churches. He borrowed from the Romans the Arch of Constantine for the front of San Francesco at Rimini, for instance. The allegory here was the triumph of Jesus over death. More than a century later, Palladio proposed two interpenetrating temple fronts as a solution for the basilica's tripartite front. At his basilicas at Venice, virtue was an allegory for the façade of the church conceived in this way. Palladio did not hesitate to graft the temple front symbolizing virtue onto the wall of a house as well. At his villas, allegory stands for truth as a heterogeneous unity achieved through symbolism and mathematical harmony.

Thus in Renaissance art and architecture, allegory plays a privileged role in the connection of the work with the divine world. In fact, this can be considered as the first step towards the release of the visual image into an autonomous world. The autonomy of art in this sense was accomplished in the age of the Enlightenment. As a consequence, allegory as a factor of unity was expelled by the Cartesian rational analysis of the world into separate fields of research. Only in recent years has allegory been restored within the limits of Postmodernism.

The Postmodern Situation

In contemporary philosophy, the Postmodern conception of the intermediate space between archetype and work is best expressed by two opposite streams of thought: the Philosophical Hermeneutics of Hans Georg Gadamer on the one hand and the Deconstruction of Jacques Derrida on the other.

Gadamer aims to restore the disrupted unity within the thing. Through a phenomenological understanding of Plato, he proposes his interpretative circle as an open ontological procedure from understanding to interpretation and to application over and over again. The notion of prejudice as opposed to scientific thinking is fundamental in Gadamer's conception of understanding. The prejudices of the interpreter, that is to say the way he, conditioned by his own historicity, interprets the past, constitute the condition of truth for the system. In the course of history, Gadamer argues, prejudice reunites the Platonic *idea* with its sensible image (*eidolon*) not on a metaphysical but on a

hermeneutical ground.[20] Attempting an interpretation of Plato's *Timaeus,* he insists that *chora* is not only the negative impediment of the rational structure of the four elements but also an ontological opportunity for all sensibles. The conception of *chora* is, according to Gadamer, the only way that sensibles as images of the ideas could exist.[21]

Derrida, by deconstructing the whole of Western philosophy, identifies as the source of the binary structure of the thing Plato's distinction between *idea* and *eidolon*. In contrast to Gadamer, who aims to unity, Derrida focuses upon separation. According to his interpretation of the Platonic *Timaeus*, between *idea* and *eidolon* an abyss opens wide, which makes their relation unapproachable as much by logical as by mythical thinking.[22] In this sense, the reference of an image to an *idea* can be neither true nor false, neither good nor bad. It is simply allegorical.[23] According to the philosophy of Deconstruction, this allegory founded upon Plato constitutes the basis of the relation within all Western binaries as form and content, nature and culture, mind and body, theory and practice, etc. Collage/montage as a device of criticism could play a principal role in exposing this situation. Gregory Ulmer sees the collage/montage technique as a manifestation of the function of the *gram* in Derrida's *Grammatology*. He quotes a passage from *Collages*:

> (In the collage's) heterogeneity....Each cited element breaks the continuity or linearity of the discourse and leads necessarily to a double reading: that of the fragment perceived in relation to its text of origin; that of the same fragment as incorporated into a new whole, a different totality. The trick of collage consists also of never entirely suppressing the alterity of these elements reunited in a contemporary composition. Thus the art of collage proves to be one of the most effective strategies in the putting into question of all the illusions of representation.[24]

In Hermeneutic and Deconstructive philosophy alike, neither *idea* nor form has absolute value any more. Their relative value derives from the interpretation of the past. The connecting factor between form and *idea* is either prejudice in the sense of Hermeneutic, or allegory in the sense of Deconstructive philosophy. In fact, the space between *idea* and form occupied by prejudice or allegory constitutes the principal preoccupation of art and architecture today. Within this space, Hermeneutic philosophy searches for consistency but is open to the interpretation forms, while Deconstructive philosophy aims to expose the inherent heterogeneity of the system. Under these circumstances, we can no longer speak of the beautiful. The connection of the Postmodern with the sublime, introduced by Lyotard, is widely accepted.

The role of mathematics seems to be quite different in Deconstructive and Hermeneutic philosophy, as far as architecture is concerned. Within the scope of Hermeneutic philosophy, mathematics could be conceived as a medium towards a consistency of form, which, in architecture at least, remains a well-organized geometrical entity. Regular solids, symmetry and simple mathematical relations seem to constitute the main characteristics of works of architecture such as Aldo Rossi's Teatro del Mondo (Venice, 1982) or Rob Krier's Housing Unit at Rauchstrasse (Berlin, 1980–84), for instance.

In works related to Deconstruction such as Daniel Libeskind's Extension to the Jewish Museum (Berlin, 1989) or Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum (Bilbao, 1993–97), mathematics is conceived as inhabitant of the chaos within the binary structure of things. As such, it could never result in a consistent, well-organized form.

In works of art that can be related with Hermeneutics, a certain consistency of form always exists. In Francis Bacon's *Eumenides* (1944) or Anselm Kiefer's *Iconoclastic Controversy* (1980), myth and history are interpreted through the prejudices of the present. On the contrary, works related to Deconstruction such as Jackson Pollock's *Full Fathom Five* (1947) or Cornelia Parker's *Cold, Dark Matter: An Exploded View* (1991), in fact cancel any attempt for consistency within the work. It becomes clear that the loss of unity within the thing is definite. In this context, allegory acquires a principal role in the pursuits of contemporary art and architecture.

Thus, while in the Renaissance allegory operated as a means of unity between the absolute and the mundane world, in Deconstructive philosophy allegory stands for the rupture between the two worlds. On the other hand, Gadamer aims at unity through prejudice, within the limits of ontological Hermeneutics.

Notes

1. Plato, *Timaeus,* 50c.
2. Ibid., 52b–d, 53a–f.
3. Plato, *Ion*, 534.
4. Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz gives a detailed account of the meaning of the term *techne* in his "Classification of the Arts in Antiquity," *Journal of the History of Ideas,* Vol. XXIV, April 1963, p. 231.
5. See Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics" (I), in *Journal of the History of Ideas,* XII, 1951, p. 499.
6. See the introduction by Hugh Tredennick in Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Hugh Tredennick, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), pp. xxii-xxiv.
7. Plato, *Philebus* 64e, trans. H. N. Fowler, cited in Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), Vol. I, p. 128.
8. Plotinus, *Enneads*, trans. Stephen McKenna (London: Faber and Faber, 1956); see *Ennead* I, Sixth Tractate; *Ennead* III, Eighth Tractate, 3–4; *Ennead* V, Eighth Tractate; *Ennead* VI, Seventh Tractate, 31–33, in particular.
9. Saint Augustine, *De Ordine*, trans. Robert P. Russell (New York: Cosmopolitan Science and Art Service Co., 1942).
10. Augustine, *De Musica,* Book VI, included in Albert Hofstadter and Richard Francis Kuhns, eds., *Philosophies of Art and Beauty* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976 [1964]).
11. From a letter Ficino wrote to Giovanni Cavalcanti, included in Albert Hofstadter and Richard Francis Kuhns, eds., *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, p. 204.
12. Marsilio Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's Symposium,* trans. Sears Reynolds Jayne (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Studies, XIX, No. 1).
13. Leon Battista Alberti, *The Ten Books of Architecture* (*De re aedificatoria*), trans. James Leoni, 1726 (New York: Dover Publications, 1986), Book VI, Ch. 2, f. m. VII V.
14. Ibid., Book VI, Ch. 13, f. b. VI.
15. Andrea Palladio, *The Four Books of Architecture* (*Quatro libri dell'architectura*) (New York: Dover Publications, 1965).
16. Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting* (*De Pictura*), trans. John R. Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956).
17. Rudolf Wittkower, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* (London: Academy Editions, 1973 [1949]), p. 45.
18. See the discussion in Ibid., pp. 41–47.
19. Ibid., p. 5.
20. Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Wand Ltd., 1975), trans. from *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1960); see pp. XXVI, 246, and 269 in particular. For the meaning of "prejudice" see pp. 252–253 and 344.
21. Hans Georg Gadamer, "Idea and Reality in Plato's *Timaeus,*" included in Hans Georg Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic, Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, translated with

an introduction by P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980); see pp. 174-175 in particular.

22. Jacques Derrida and Peter Eisenman, *Chora L Works*, New York: The Monacelli Press, 1997.
23. For the connection between collage and allegory within the scope of Deconstruction, see Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism," in *October* 12 and 13, 1980; see also Gregory L. Ulmer, "The Object of Post-Criticism," in Hal Foster ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983).
24. Ibid., Gregory L. Ulmer, p. 88; the quotation is taken from: Group *Mu* eds., *Collages* (Paris: Union Générale, 1978), pp. 34–5.

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