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***Architecture as
image-space-text***

Betty Nigianni

Introduction

A poem by Sylvia Plath provides a basis for contemplation on the inextricable relations between 'space', 'image' and 'text' and on how they might inform architectural representation in a critical way. Departing from a framework that sees an essentially empathetic and inter-productive relation between space and the subject, this article discusses the engagement of architectural representation with visuality and textuality, reconsidered however through a poeticising subjectivity. Drawing upon Benjamin, Bachelard and Lacan, I argue that the role of visuality in spatial experience should be reconsidered beyond conventional optics, but instead in terms of 'images' that derive from psychic activity. In this sense, 'image' refers to an endowment of architectural space with a subjective quality, visuality therefore implies a certain creative engagement with the object. Such a perspective bears interesting implications for architectural representation. From a 'text' to be 'read', something to be gazed at from a certain viewpoint, architecture becomes something that interacts with the subject, making impossible its representation in the conventional sense. There is no 'reality' to be represented, but an ongoing interaction between 'object' and 'subject', 'architectural space' and 'user', producing each time a different 'textuality' that allows meaning to be reconstructed over and over; and so a different 'spatiality' that provides a terrain for the subject's transformation. I then suggest that architecture is rethought as a 'hybrid' created out of materiality, narratives and psychic space – what I call 'image-space-text'; and that architectural representation does not simply recreate, but rather creates that hybridity. Engaging with a variety of sources, such as the visual arts, film, or literary narratives, could be a way to do this. By addressing the subject's reality and somehow weaving it into the design process architectural representation will make critical architecture possible.

Accepting an empathetic and inter-productive relation between space and the subject, this article discusses the involvement of architectural representation with visuality and textuality reconsidered through subjectivity and poetic imagination. 'Tale of a Tub', a poem "written from the bathtub" by Sylvia Plath¹, accompanies, interrupts, highlights, juxtaposes the discussion. The poem is however not analysed or interpreted. I have not treated the poem as a 'representation' in

the conventional sense, but as a framework which enabled my reflections to develop. As the article sets out to argue, representation cannot be limited to the re-creation or interpretation of a reality; to represent is essentially to create new spaces for critical experience and practice.

Architecture as image-space-text

Current visual theory and practice have been much preoccupied with a reconceptualisation of vision and visibility, and have stressed the necessity of postmodern representation to go beyond the 'objective', focused modernist vision, to embrace issues of subjectivity. Critiques of modern models of representation have specifically attacked 'Cartesian perspectivalism', mainly for its separation of subject and object, which renders the first transcendental and the second inert, recreating a bipolarity of subject and object that sustains metaphysical thought, empirical science, and capitalist logic;² as visual theorist and artist Victor Burgin argues, "the image of the convergence of parallel lines toward a vanishing point on the horizon became the very figure of Western European global economic and political ambitions."³ Critics of perspectivalism rejected the consideration of perspective as empirically true and universally valid, and instead they tried to demonstrate how it is a 'symbolic form', inconsistent and discontinuous as any other model of representation. A concern about sight as a historical and social fact has developed therefore; as art critic Hal Foster argues, there has been an effort 'to 'socialise vision' and to 'indicate its part in the production of subjectivity'.⁴ In addition, drawing from the Lacanian dialectic of the gaze, a thinking on vision's own production as part of intersubjectivity has further contributed to that dialogue.

In this context, vision and visibility have been addressed as involving – if we were to make any distinctions – together body, psyche and mind. Although a difference between the two terms has been sustained, with vision related to sight as a physical operation, and visibility considered as a social construct related more to mental images rather than to what is visible to the eye, that difference has been constantly challenged. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty recognised the guide of Plato's 'idea' in the eye and made a point about mental images originating in the realm of the senses; inspired by Merleau-Ponty, Jacques Lacan in his turn stressed the importance of the role of visual images in the workings of the human mind.

Such a rethinking of vision and visibility has inevitably been integrated with a rethinking of spatiality. If perspective is but a model of perceiving and constructing the world, then there is more than perspectival space. Instead of the universal and stable entity envisaged since the Enlightenment, space has been gradually reconsidered in terms of the subject's experience and production; from the Kantian *a priori*, it has moved closer to the Freudian extension of the psyche.

The photographic chamber of the eye
records bare painted walls, while an electric light

flays the chromium nerves of plumbing raw;
such poverty assaults the ego; caught
naked in the merely actual room,
the stranger in the lavatory mirror
puts on a public grin, repeats our name
but scrupulously reflects the usual terror.⁵

Walter Benjamin observed a connection between the human mind and architectural space through a form of 'photographic' image.⁶ In *A Berlin Chronicle*, he recollects his childhood memories of Berlin largely as *tableaus*, 'street images' as he names them: these are snapshots of the physical fabric of the city invested with a personal sense of meaning.⁷ For Benjamin, visuality has an important part in the process of coming to terms with space and it is formed by a kind of, in his own terms, 'unconscious optics':⁸

"Nothing prevents our keeping rooms in which we have spent twenty-four hours more or less clearly in our memory, and forgetting others in which we passed months. It is not, therefore, due to insufficient exposure time if no image appears on the plate of remembrance. More frequent, perhaps, are the cases when the half-light of habit denies the plate the necessary light for years, until one day from an alien source it flashes as if from burning magnesium powder, and now a snapshot transfixes the room's image on the plate."⁹

This imprinting of architectural spaces onto the mind, similar to the camera's 'snapshot', is not dependent upon the physics of conventional optics: buildings are experienced as a series of pictures taken out of a deeply personal photographic album.

'Image' plays a vital role in Gaston Bachelard's thinking on architectural space. Bachelard sees spatial experience as being formed by 'images' with a localising quality that come before thoughts and out of psychic activity.¹⁰ In *The Poetics of Space*, rooms, even chests and drawers, are dreamed, imagined or remembered; spatial experience is not architectural in the conventional sense, much less geometrical, but instead occurs through images that relate "to an archetype lying dormant in the depths of the unconscious".¹¹ Although the Bachelardian 'poetic image' is less optical and more prototypical than Benjamin's 'snapshot', it still evokes a spatial visualising that bears a personal, 'intimate' as Bachelard calls it, dimension.

In this context, and for both Benjamin and Bachelard, 'image' refers to an endowment of architectural space with a 'subjective', psychical quality, visuality therefore implies a creative engagement with the 'objective' world of architecture. Benjamin argues that we experience our environment going through a certain process of identification with it. In his essays 'On the mimetic

faculty' and 'Doctrine of the similar', he describes that process as 'mimesis', using the term not in the Platonic sense of a compromised 'imitation' of an original, but rather in the psychoanalytic sense of a creative empathising with the object.¹² For Benjamin, the ability to identify with and assimilate to the environment refers to a constructive reinterpretation that goes beyond mere imitation and becomes a creative act in itself.¹³ In that perspective, vision operates on a whole new level: Benjamin's phrase "For I was there... when I gazed",¹⁴ describing his experience of looking at postcards and feeling instantly transported into the places they depicted, a creative interchange between spatiality and visuality. Moreover 'image' in its common usage as 'imitation', referring to an analogical representation, a re-presentation, an ultimate resurrection of an object, is subverted to be associated with imagination and a poeticising subjectivity.

Just how guilty are we when the ceiling
reveals no cracks that can be decoded? when washbowl
maintains it has no more holy calling
than physical ablution, and the towel
dryly disclaims that fierce troll faces lurk
in its explicit folds? or when the window,
blind with steam, will not admit the dark
which shrouds our prospects in ambiguous shadow?¹⁵

From a 'text' to be 'read' then, something to be gazed at from a certain viewpoint, architecture becomes something that interacts with the subject. Reading oneself into architecture and seeing oneself reflected in architecture renders architectural experience a discursive process with obvious implications for architectural representation. At this point, I think that Lacan's account of visuality becomes important. His theory of the 'gaze' or 'look', which presupposes that the object we are looking at looks back at us, implies also a certain mimetic attitude towards the environment.¹⁶ But further, Lacan's idea of an 'I' that is "photo-graphed"¹⁷ to some extent by a world of inanimate objects, apart from reconstituting the subject as a being that exists "in the spectacle of the world",¹⁸ it marks a major shift in representation. As Lacan claims:

"When I am presented with a representation I assure myself that I know quite a lot about it, I assure myself as a consciousness that knows that it is only representation, and that there is, beyond the thing, the thing itself; behind the phenomenon, there is a noumenon... In my opinion, it is not in this dialectic between the surface and that which is beyond that things are suspended. For my part, I set out from the fact that there is something that establishes a fracture, a bi-partition, a splitting of the being to which the being accommodates itself, even in the natural world."¹⁹

In these terms, there is no 'reality' to be represented, but rather an ongoing interaction between 'object' and 'subject', 'architecture' and 'user'. As vision becomes susceptible to subjectivity, seeing from a point of view that is always related to an object becomes inadequate; instead representation should somehow provide us with a Lacanian 'look', which, as visual theorist Colin MacCabe argues, "is not defined by a science of optics in which the eye features as a geometrical point, but by the fact that the object we are looking at offers a position from which we can be looked at – and this look is not punctual but shifts over the surface".²⁰

Twenty years ago, the familiar tub
bred an ample patch of omens; but now
water faucets spawn no danger; each crab
and octopus – scrabbling just beyond the view,
waiting for some accidental break
in ritual, to strike – is definitely gone;
the authentic sea denies them and will pluck
fantastic flesh down to the honest bone.

We take the plunge; under water our limbs
waver, faintly green, shuddering away
from the genuine colour of skin; can our dreams
ever blur the intransigent lines which draw
the shape that shuts us in? absolute fact
intrudes even when the revolted eye
is closed; the tub exists behind our back:
its glittering surfaces are blank and true.²¹

Representation in that sense produces a different 'textuality', which, not only allows meaning to be reconstructed over and over, but further reconstitutes the subject as a territory for transformation. A representation informed by the gaze of the Other is a critical representation; it subverts Cartesian space to open up the transcendental space of the relation to the Other.²² The intrusion of the other that makes of the self a spectacle or object in relation to that other is accompanied by a radical decentering of the subject; and, although in Lacan that decentering takes the form of a threatening annihilation, in certain 'alternative' scopic regimes, as art historian Norman Bryson points out, is celebrated.²³ The subject's acknowledgment of itself in noncentered terms becomes a way of empathising with the world, and in Benjamin's terms, it is through empathy that we can if not fully understand the other.

What is important to note here, and as far as it concerns architectural representation, is that for Bachelard, empathy is further a matter of accepting spatiality. The relation of the self to the other, what Bachelard calls 'transsubjectivity', happens in that in-between space where boundaries get fuzzy, where, as he observes, "inside and outside are not abandoned to their geometrical opposition".²⁴ The fear of living without a 'geometrical homeland', in 'ambiguous space' of no clear distinction between inside and outside, refers to a certain misrecognition of the spatial contingency of life. Bachelard argues however that at the level of the poetic image this is avoided; through the image, there is a union "of a pure but short-lived subjectivity and a reality which will not necessarily reach its final constitution",²⁵ that enables a kind of understanding of the self and other through each other.

In this particular tub, two knees jut up
like icebergs, while minute brown hairs rise
on arms and legs in a fringe of kelp; green soap
navigates the tidal slosh of seas
breaking on legendary beaches; in faith
we shall board our imagined ship and wildly sail
among sacred islands of the mad till death
shatters the fabulous stars and makes us real.²⁶

It is becoming obvious so far that critical architectural representation, in terms of opening up architectural space to the subject's experience, interpretation and transformation, cannot escape to address issues of visuality and textuality as discussed above. For this, it will have to go beyond architecture's geometrical physicality, to recognise it as a 'hybrid' created out of material and psychic space, images, and poetic narratives; and further, beyond simply re-creating, reflecting architecture, to creating that 'hybridity' and so critical environments. Drawing from a variety of sources, such as the visual arts, film practice, or literary narratives, could be a way to do this. Apart from the obvious by now wish to draw links between visuality, space and narratives, my play on Roland Barthes' term 'image space text' in the title of this article intends to point out possible similarities between architectural design and film practice, in terms of combining together a variety of elements, which are perhaps worth exploring. A number of architectural theorists, such as Juhani Pallasmaa, Iain Borden, and, more recently and more extensively, Jonathan Hill, have pointed towards that direction. But also a number of practicing architects have experimented with a variety of materials as part of their design process. Niall McLaughlin has worked with visual

images, inspired by paintings or literature, as well as with narratives, either from the client's own brief or from the history of the site, to come up with an actual design proposal.

Such practices introduce new systems of visual and spatial representations, which somehow reflect "a historical transition from the representational priority of 'surface' to that of 'interface',²⁷ rendering architecture from an 'object', a built 'thing', to "a set of flows", "a set of experiences and reproductions".²⁸ To do so, they somehow bring into spatial representation "the subject's psychical reality";²⁹ instead of the Latin *imago* of imitation, they draw more from the Freudian *imago* of "unconscious representation" and imagination.³⁰ As this article set out to demonstrate, critical representation cannot escape an engagement with subjectivity. In this way, the search of alternative visualities, spatialities, architectures, will not foreclose difference but rather keep it at play.

Notes

¹ Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, London: Faber & Faber, 1981, p. 275.

² Hal Foster, 'Preface', in Hal Foster (ed), *Vision and Visuality*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1988, p. 10.

³ Victor Burgin, *In/Different Spaces. Place and Memory in Visual Culture*, Berkeley, London & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996, pp. 148-149.

⁴ Hal Foster, 'Preface', in Hal Foster (ed) *Vision and Visuality*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1988, p. 9.

⁵ Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 24.

⁶ Neil Leach, 'Walter Benjamin, mimesis and the dreamworld of photography', in Iain Borden & Jane Rendell (eds), *Inter/Sections: Architectural Histories and Critical Theories*, London & New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 28.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, London: Fontana Press, 1992, pp. 230-231.

⁹ Walter Benjamin, *One-way Street*, London: Verso, 1979, pp. 342-343.

¹⁰ Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place. A philosophical history*, Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1998, p. 287.

¹¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1994, p. xvi.

¹² As discussed by Freud, the joke communicates through a certain empathising with the subject of the joke, which takes place in the imagination. For Freud, that kind of mimesis implies a creative engagement with the 'object' and could be of potential significance for aesthetics. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious*, London: Penguin, 1976.

¹³ Neil Leach, 'Walter Benjamin, mimesis and the dreamworld of photography', in Iain Borden and Jane Rendell (eds) *Inter/Sections: Architectural Histories and Critical Theories*, London & New York: Routledge, 2000, pp. 30-31.

¹⁴ Benjamin, *Reflections*, p. 328.

¹⁵ Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 24.

¹⁶ In 'The split between the eye and the gaze', Lacan refers extensively to Roger Caillois' account of 'mimicry' in nature. In Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, London: Penguin Books, 1994, pp. 73-74.

¹⁷ Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p. 106.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 75.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 106.

²⁰ Colin MacCabe, *Theoretical Essays. Film, Linguistics, Literature*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985, p. 67.

²¹ Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 25.

²² Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p. 119.

²³ Norman Bryson, 'The Gaze in the Expanded Field', in Hal Foster (ed) *Vision and Visuality*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1988, p. 104.

²⁴ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 230.

²⁵ Ibid., p. xix.

²⁶ Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 25.

²⁷ Victor Burgin, *In/Different Spaces. Place and Memory in Visual Culture*, Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1996, p. 157.

²⁸ Iain Borden, *Skateboarding, Space and the City. Architecture and the Body*, Oxford & New York: Berg, 2001, p. 6.

²⁹ I further refer here to Victor Burgin's call for an introduction of 'psychical reality' into spatial representation in order to keep up with our apprehension of space in post-modernity; and his observation that 'attention to psychical reality calls for a *psychical realism* – impossible, but nevertheless...' In V. Burgin, *In/Different Spaces. Place and Memory in Visual Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, University of California Press, 1996), p. 56

³⁰ Jacques Laplanche & Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The language of psychoanalysis*, London: Karnac Books, 1973, p. 211.

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