

**International Congress of Aesthetics
2007 “Aesthetics Bridging Cultures”**

**Aspects of Universality in Modern and
Postmodern Architecture**

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1. Introduction

In the pre-Modern or traditional societies art and architecture constituted – in philosophical terms - *imitation* (Plato), or *symbol* (Neoplatonic philosophy), of an absolute reality which embraced human creation as well as nature. Unity was understood as a qualitative principle deriving from the past. Talking about Western culture in particular, we could say that religion as well as philosophical metaphysics provided as much the forms as they provided the conditions of existence of the works of art and architecture in the Classical, the Medieval or the Renaissance milieu.

Through the centuries, man’s desire to gain full control over his knowledge, motivated a constant strife to confine himself within the limits of reason as separate from metaphysics. This great endeavor was mainly accomplished by the Enlightenment. However, the separation of reason from metaphysics was already present in the Medieval replacement of metaphysics by religion and the symbolic interpretation of Greek speculative thinking, while, in the Renaissance, reason was gradually emancipated from its Medieval foundation of faith.¹

After a constant process of reductions and eliminations, the Aristotelian attributes (*symbebekota*) - that is to say the quantitative characteristics of the thing - were considered, without any qualitative distinction, as constituting the thing itself.² And since all attributes are in a constant process of change, the concept of an unchangeable, immutable being distinct from the world of change and decay has been replaced by laws of change and movement. In Galileo’s and Hobbes’ universe alike, being was defined by universal and eternal mathematical laws, as they derived from the quantification of the attributes.

Next, Kant's concept of aesthetic disinterestedness, Adorno's negative aesthetics, Lyotard's postmodern sublime and Nietzsche's tragic aesthetics, will constitute different vehicles for the investigation of the notion of universality in Modern and Postmodern architecture. The term universality suggests a common attitude, which could be shared by all humans, independently of cultural, political or other identities.

2. Kant's concept of aesthetic autonomy and Modern architecture

During the Enlightenment, art lost the metaphysical foundation, which it enjoyed in the past. Instead, art claimed autonomy, asking for a shelter within human mind. The concept of aesthetic autonomy started to acquire a theoretical formulation in eighteenth century British thought, and found an integrated place in philosophy with Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. The principles of art are universal and subjective, as far as they are founded on the attitude of *aesthetic disinterestedness* displayed by the human subject, Kant claims.³ *Aesthetic disinterestedness*, instead of deriving from the ontological position of the aesthetic object – as it happens in Plato's or Aristotle's conception of the *idea* or *eidos* as the unchangeable and immutable essence of things – gains its universality through its independence from morality, reason, feeling, any self-referred or practical interest.⁴ The beautiful sentiment results from the harmonic relation between the faculty of understanding and the faculty of imagination, on the ground of *aesthetic disinterestedness*.

Modern architecture is an art form which not only belongs to the sphere of the aesthetic, but is also committed to satisfy certain practical purposes. The contradiction inherent in the Modern Movement resides in the fact that it never managed to resolve the duality between its aesthetic and its practical dimensions or between form and function. The fundamental difference between the Modern Movement and Classical, Medieval or Renaissance architecture is that in the second case this duality does not exist. Palladio's Villa Rotonda for instance, is absolutely functional in so far as function is pre-described by truth and morality as metaphysical universal principles.⁵

In Modernity, the position of architecture seems exactly the opposite. On the one hand the aesthetic factor is defined by Kant "apart from any (moral or other practical) interest", and thus is incompatible with the practical needs architecture has to serve. On the other hand, if we conceive of the practical factor as operating within the social-political framework of Modernity, it has to follow its principles. In this sense, technological development and the requirement for function, brought about by economic imperatives, constituted the apparent moral basis of the Modern Movement architecture. The paradoxical situation, where the aesthetic factor claims absolute autonomy, while the practical factor asserts that, in social terms, is the only true source of form, constitutes the inner opposition of Modern architecture, which was never resolved.

Nevertheless, although the character of the work of architecture as a use-object was often overstated by some of the leaders of the movement, the priority of the aesthetic factor is apparent in the experimental investigations of major trends within

it. Intellectual principles that derive from abstract reasoning, nature or technology, govern the aesthetic requirements of Modern avant-garde groups such as Purism, De Stijl, Constructivism, or Expressionism.⁶

However, the split between the aesthetic and the practical self of the Modern Movement architecture was first expressed, at the Cologne Werkbund Exhibition, as early as in 1914. Mathesius declared: “Only standardization can (...) once again introduce a universally valid, self-certain taste.” In the name of social imperatives that had first been raised by the nineteenth century critics such as Pugin, Ruskin and Morris, leaders of the Modern Movement enthusiastically worked for an architecture that could be produced cheaply and become available to all. After the 1945 in particular, Functionalism or Rationalism as International Style prevailed, at the expense of aesthetic autonomy.

3. Adorno’s *negative aesthetics* and their application to Modern architecture

During the sixties, Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory* undertakes the endeavor to restore the lost unity between aesthetic autonomy and society, on a Marxist / Hegelian basis.⁷ Immediately after the Second World War, Horkheimer and Adorno, in the *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* (1944), provoked the self-destructive attitude of the reason of the Enlightenment, through its conversion into instrumental. They propose a *new rationality*, on the basis of an all-embracing and humanistic spirit of reason. *Aesthetic rationality* bears for Adorno this meaning.

In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno conceptualizes art as more than a mere reflection of the economic-social reality, as Marx asserts. For Adorno, art is reality as such; it constitutes an anti-system, which aims to truth by exposing reification and alienation within modern society. Thus art acquires a political role: it reacts to social reality by negating beauty and harmony in favor of fragmentation and truth. In this way, art, far from becoming an instrument of exercising power, comes forth as autonomous. In Adorno’s aesthetics, the fragmented and ephemeral character of the work of art aims to the disruption of its relation with metaphysics on the one hand, and instrumental reason on the other. In this way, form transcends its empirical nature and becomes critical and “mediated”. Form consists of physical as well as well as historical / cultural material. In this way, it concerns society as a whole.

The social function of art, according to Adorno, is that it does not have to serve any interest. Society has to be present at the stage of creation, otherwise art declines into metaphysics or formalism. In this spirit, Adorno accuses mass culture and typification as reflections of the economic-social reality. Instead of being elements of human emancipation, they have turned into instruments of social control. Adorno proposes a dialectic between the *rational* (that which we want to imitate) and the *constructive* (that which we want to transcend through emancipation).

Modern avant-garde’s radicalism and incoherency offer a fertile ground for the application of Adorno’s aesthetics. The architectural theorist Bruno Zevi, in his article *Where is Modern Architecture going?* states seven principles of Modern architecture which have to be inherited by the next generations:

- a. The *Zero Degree*, that is the listing of contents and functions as derived from the experience of the Arts and Crafts;
- b. Asymmetry and dissonance, as derived from Art Nouveau and Bauhaus;
- c. Anti-perspective three-dimensionality derived from Expressionism;
- d. Four-dimensional deconstructing of the box, derived from Cubism and De Stijl;
- e. Structural inventiveness, inherent in the architectural process, derived from nineteenth century engineering;
- f. Space and time, dynamic creativity of the cavities where people live, derived from Wright;
- g. Continuity between building and city, city and landscape, derived from modern planning.⁸

Zevi, launching an attack on the International Style as pseudo-modern, writes that it ignores dissonance as well as spatial fluency, and that it sticks on symmetry and proportion. “It looks as if Einstein, Freud and Schoenberg had never lived”, he comments. Nevertheless, it seems that the tradition of Mendelsohn, Scharoun, Theo Van Doesburg, Frank Lloyd Wright, Alvar Aalto remains alive today through the works of Hans Hollein, Peter Cook, Tadao Ando, Kitso Kurokawa.

4. Lyotard and the Postmodern sublime in architecture

Jean –Francois Lyotard argues that the project of Adorno, despite its Hegelian basis, is closer to the Kantian *Critique of Judgement* than to Hegel’s transcendentalism. The continuous reexamination of the thought of the Enlightenment proposed by Adorno is adopted by Lyotard on a different ground. Lyotard insists on the Kantian separation of the faculties. In Kant, he argues, the concept and the sensible are separated by a chasm, and only a Hegelian illusion could bring real unity between them. Kant knew, states Lyotard, that the price for the reconciliation between the whole and the one, the concept and the sensible, is terror. Europe has paid a high price for the nostalgia of the whole, in the last two centuries.

Lyotard substitutes for the perspective of a triumph of human emancipation through reason – introduced by the Enlightenment – the protection of *difference*. The conflicting rights between different people, different social, political, cultural or other groups, differences outside or within the subject, have to be preserved. The heterodoxy of desire is juxtaposed to every authoritative system deriving from the dominative demands of reason. So, we can talk about universality not in the sense of aiming to homogeneity or of directing to a center, but in the sense of preserving the differences in the limits of plurality which human life and thinking gained after their liberation from metaphysics.

In the seminal essay *What is postmodernism*⁹, Lyotard – on the ground of the crisis of the great narratives of modernity – defines the term *postmodernism* in the philosophy of art with reference to Kant’s sentiment of the sublime. Lyotard focuses on the conflict between the faculties of the subject, the faculty to conceive and the faculty to present, or between reason and imagination. This conflict causes – according to Kant – a strong and equivocal emotion: *the pleasure that reason should exceed all presentation, the pain that imagination should not be equal to the concept*.¹⁰ We have the sublime sentiment when the imagination fails to present – that is to say to give form to – Ideas of reason. For instance, no presentation is possible of the Idea of the world as a totality, or of the Idea of the infinitely great or infinitely powerful.

In this spirit, Lyotard conceives of the *postmodern* as a wider category of the *modern*. The *modern* expresses the unrepresentable as missing contents, while form keeps a recognizable consistency. The *postmodern* overcomes the limits of consistency of form, *puts the unrepresentable in presentation itself*¹¹; form becomes an event.

We could say that the duty of postmodern architecture is, in Lyotard's words, *to present allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented*.¹² Such allusions could be considered works of architecture created by Coop Himmelblau or Daniel Liebeskind. Modern avant-garde architecture follows a step behind, as far as - even in the works of De Stijl or Expressionism - it always keeps a certain consistency of form. With the conflict between the faculty of reason and the faculty of imagination, architecture remains autonomous in Kant's sense. It also escapes the modernist request for function and practicality, in the sense that the fights between form and function, or form and materials, are transmuted into, or absorbed by, the aesthetic conflict. The same applies to cultural, political or other differences which engage the contemporary man.

5. Nietzsche and the tragic question about architecture

Nietzsche, accusing Kant that he simply recorded established values, insists on a *philosophy of values*, based on the investigation of the evaluating principles of values. This investigation refers to the problem of creation or origin and constitutes the *genealogy of values*. It is interwoven with the notion of meaning.¹³

For Nietzsche, the essence of a thing is always its meaning and value. The value and meaning of a thing change, according to the powers/gods who appropriate it. In this way, the question about essence becomes *which powers* and *which will* underlie these powers. This is the *tragic* question. It is a question about aesthetics, a question about the joy of life. It does not involve metaphysics and it has no relation to dialectical or causal logic. It always points to Dionysus as an *affirmation of the multiple*. Dionysus is the will to power, the god of transformations; he is the one who verifies the multiple and he is the one who is verified by it.¹⁴

Creation springs out from the *play instinct*. In the *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche - interpreting Heraclitus - writes that the *play* has two moments: the becoming and the being of the becoming. It also has one player: the artist or the child. The Zeus-child, the Dionysus, appears in myths among his divine toys.¹⁵ Through the *play instinct*, Nietzsche, like Heraclitus, comprehends existence as an aesthetic and not as a moral or religious phenomenon.

Nietzsche's notion of the *eternal return* indicates the identity of the play of life and creation.¹⁶ The *eternal return* is the composition of time and its dimensions, of multiformity and its reproductions, of becoming as well as being verified by the becoming. The one exists only through its eternal transformations.

The principle of the *eternal return* is the *will to power*. The *will to power* constitutes the compositional principle of the "powers", the difference between them as well as their reproduction. The *will to power* regulates the relation between different powers. It is a plastic principle, which can only be approached empirically. It

is transformable along with the thing it defines; it is not wider than it, nor can be separated from it. The will to power designates the difference between the powers and constitutes their being. Furthermore, the will to power constitutes the genealogical as well as the compositional principle of the powers.

Nietzsche conceived of the composition of powers as the *eternal return*, the reproduction of the multiform. Gilles Deleuze states that Nietzsche transformed radically the notion of composition which constitutes a central point in Kant's philosophy; from a harmonic relation between terms which remained external to the thing created, composition became a relation between powers.¹⁷

Nietzschean powers can be "active" or "counter-active". A counter-active power is utilitarian, it separates the active power from what it can; it rejects the active power. Although they occupy all hierarchy, counter-active powers represent the triumph of the weak and the servants. To these belong religion, morality and the state. An active power is plastic, dominative and subjugative. It reaches to the limits of what it can. It reaffirms its difference through multiformity and the *eternal return*. It makes its difference object of pleasure and affirmation.

In the dawn of the twentieth century, Modern architecture, far beyond appearing behind its own mask, used the secure mask of Classical architecture. In fact, if we consider Renaissance as the beginning of the Modern, we could say that it took five centuries for Modern architecture, hiding behind continuous recurrences of the Classical mask, could surpass unity and "good" forms, and seek for the joy of life within dismemberment and multiplicity; that is to say, the essence of the tragic.

The heroic character of Modern avant-garde consists of the rejection of its Classical archetype, and the abolition of its identity. Through fragmentation and distortion, difference and contradiction, collision and complexity, works of Modern avant-garde and Postmodern criticism, transcend the limits of space and time, and gain universality. Based on Nietzsche, we could say that within Modern or Postmodern architecture, counter-active powers, such as functionalism and economic and political requirements, connect it to nihilism and death, while active powers as imagination and freedom connect it to life and creation. Modern avant-garde and especially Surrealism and Expressionism are related to Nietzsche's aesthetics.

Departing from Nietzsche, Foucault insists in building up genealogies, while Deleuze focuses on the Dionysian aspect of the aesthetic, that is to say on distortion, fluidity, continuity, multiformity.¹⁸ Texts by Bernard Cache and Greg Lynn unfold the Deleuzian philosophy of space into architecture.¹⁹ From contemporary architects, works by Zaha Hadid or Frank Gehry, seem to be close to the kind of sensational pleasure proposed by Deleuze. Derrida on the other hand, is particularly connected with architecture, through works and texts by Peter Eisenman, Bernard Tschumi, the Coop Himmelblau, or Daniel Libeskind. Here, architectural composition has been challenged by distortion, fragmentation, multiformity, contingency, while disruptive powers cause explosion of the boundaries.²⁰

6. Conclusions

We have discussed some aspects of the aesthetic appreciation of Modern and Postmodern architecture, which on the one hand are outside the field of metaphysical / religious tradition of Western man and, on the other stand critical towards the heritage of the Enlightenment. Departing from Kant, universality is understood as a reference to the autonomy of the human subject.

Kant's separation of the faculties of human mind and the grounding of the autonomy of art upon this separation, opens wide the route towards a critical attitude of modern art. Adorno aims to restore the unity between art and society as a ceaseless negation of instrumental reason and its implications, while at the same time, he insists in preserving aesthetic autonomy. Lyotard focuses on the unbridgeable collision between reason and imagination in Kant's aesthetic of the sublime, and points us to the protection of difference. In the end, Nietzsche, through his conception of existence offers an affirmation of the multiple on Dionysian ground and turns upside down the project of the Enlightenment.

Thus in aesthetic terms, Modern as well as Postmodern architecture can only gain universality by being transmuted into a continuous inquiry of the religious, moral, political, economic or functional basis of contemporary societies. This discourse causes architecture to lose its consistency of form and become *an allusion to the unrepresentable* for Lyotard, *an anti-system* for Adorno, or *a tragic play* for Nietzsche. Even Foucault, Deleuze or Derrida have worked in favor of this "tradition".

Notes and references

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20. See for instance: Derrida, Jacques & Eisenman, Peter. *Chora L Works* (J. Kipnis & Th. Leeser eds). The Monacelli Press.

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