

SMALL SUBJECT LARGE OBJECT

AND THE GROUND BENEATH OUR FEET

"All my life, I worshipped her
Her golden voice, her beauty's beat
How she made us feel
How she made me real
and the ground beneath her feet
and the ground beneath her feet"
--Salman Rushdie (1999)

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The unresolved (unresolvable?) relationship of the I to "the given" runs like a river through the topological landscape of phenomenology, linguistics, psychoanalysis, and, yes, metaphysics. Its elastic conditions (contours) shape the very nature of nature -- a system that is at once provisional (as construct) and pre-existing (as thing itself or things themselves).

The I/world dyad made an appearance in Rem Koolhaas' 1972 *Exodus, or The Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture* as a perhaps mock pernicious dialectic leading forward to the various facetious and often cynical versions of architecture and urbanism associated with XLG operations. (1) The superurbanisms of the Dutch school seem particularly keen to exploit the manufactured nature of landscape in the Netherlands (the Low Countries), suggesting a Netherlandish (Netheroutlandish) school of landscape urbanism that resides in the attenuated, problematical interstices of the I/world complex. Yet this complex represents the figure of "ground" itself, or "as such", versus anything particular or programmatic.

The I/world figure can be detected in Kant, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, the post-*Tractatus* Wittgenstein, Lacan and most of the post-structuralist debate centering on the vanity (autonomy and mutability) of instrumental systems (including the discursive *largesse* of language). Lacan's Mirror Stage seems a precious artifact/cipher of the emergent tendencies of the self confronting the world. If the romantic sensibility of Caspar David Friedrich also contained intimations or adumbrations of a rupture or break in this primordial relationship, painting took this crisis to its extreme in high modernism as

various forms of formalism enshrined the breach in a revolutionary and utopian groundless and abstract idealism.

It was Kant and then Fichte that tested that ground most severely by probing the epistemological foundations of forms of knowledge. If Kant's scepticism was overturned by Fichte's idealism, Hegel constructed an alternative ground while Nietzsche demolished the typical ground of the adopted, historical (suspect) terrain of rational constitutive orders to liberate spirit (or the spirit of the haunted ground itself). Post-Kantians (Cassirer et alia) merely indulged the collective appetite for investigating the symbolic structures of cultural production. Cassirer, for example, reduced Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* to a "biography of the world".(2)

What remains, today, are the tonalities and nuances (the debris field) -- or *cultural shadows* -- that crisscross this ancient figure of Being-in-the-World, i.e., tried and often untrue locutions, and figures of operational and notational (noetic) configurations that at best circle this site that perhaps is quite simply an empty site (or non-site) without real *or* imaginary significance.

If this site is an ontological ground, it is also the place where the I engages in oftentimes illicit but necessary exchange with the things of the world which, if scepticism is valid, are representations versus actual entities. The actual remains out of bounds as long as empirical/ materialist knowledge is the principal horizon of investigation. Bringing such things 'home' -- back to the fictive nexus -- would then seem to require, as posited by Rudolf Steiner in *Truth and Knowledge* (1892), an entirely new (different) set of obsessions and/or hauntings of time and space, which he suggests are possible if the supposed transcendental thing-in-itself is instead understood to be *here and now* within things. His architectural experiments at Dornach (near Basel, Switzerland) would seem to support this notion insofar as the Second Goetheanum is reputedly a secret source of inspiration behind Le Corbusier's Notre-Dame-du-Haut at Ronchamp in the nearby Jura. This irrepressible idea of immanence is central to current concepts of radical contingency -- the topological spirit beginning to re-shape the world of landscape + architecture. Such concerns essentially appropriate and expropriate earlier concerns regarding morphology. Steiner's Second Goetheanum is a built expression of an extreme concern for morphological *jouissance* -- a spirit he extracted from Goethe and re-deployed through his extensive work mining the idea of entelechy (spiritual form).

Michel de Certeau, in *The Mystic Fable* (1992), qualified the mnemonic language game played by "mystic authors" as a type of demarcation of a frontier or territory within discourse. "These ancient authors introduce into our present-day world the language of a 'nostalgia' in relation to that other country [a third, strange region – limbo] ... What these authors bring into play is therefore not reducible to an interest in the past, nor to even a voyage into the recesses of our memory. They are like statues erected to mark the boundaries of an 'elsewhere' that is not remote, a place they both produce and guard. They form, with their bodies and their texts, a frontier that divides space and transforms their reader into an inhabitant of the country, or the suburbs, far from the nowhere where they house the essential. They articulate in this way the foreignness of our own place, and therefore a desire to return to our native land."(3)

The artist/seer and the poet/dreamer are so-to-speak outside the normative figures of constructed ground, and, as de Certeau has demonstrated, such dreaming subjects must out of necessity propose an entirely different "place to inhabit". This other place is set up within that fictive place between self and object, figure and ground, I and world as an impossible-possible other world. Here is the visionary topos of the imaginary projected not back into the world but into and beyond the self to where the world is mirrored, and apropos the timeless gesture of re-making the world, here begins a re-construction of unity and the undoing of dialectical, confrontational, anamorphic, and perspectival distortions of the ground beneath our feet.(4)

O MUSE, THINK! - MULTA VIA FLUVIUS - SAILING AWAY - ALL THAT YOU'D GLADLY LEAVE BEHIND!

The present-day debris field of cultural production is animated by several dynamic currents not the least of which is a new type of Mannerism in the arts and an attendant new Baroque in architecture. Both of these art-historical terms, however, in this context, must be considered as synchronic versus diachronic. Both Mannerism and the Baroque are much-disputed categories of experience, and both are cyclic in nature -- they come and they go. When they return, it is usually a sign that something significant is underway.

Of the latter, Gilles Deleuze is primarily responsible for resurrecting the complex metaphysical contortions of this world-conception by way of Leibniz. The Baroque has long been re-incorporated into the new minimalism (in art and in music). With architecture, however, a true sign of this rebirth first occurred when topological and morphological studies displaced typological and linguistic analogs in the generation of form. Robert Venturi's "gentle manifesto" *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966) did not so much bring on a new spirit of form as the art of bricolage. This post-modern New Deal, insofar as it was a response to the pretensions of modernism, created an architectural chiasmus that, in turn, brought about the unfolding of a whole new architecture. The emergent "new" architecture, now appearing in the billowing cloud of smoke and ash generated by the collapse of the modern-post-modern chiasmus(5), may be recognized by the singular fact that it re-negotiates the primordial, metaphysical ground of *architecture itself*. It is this re-negotiated ground, often misconstrued as literal ground, that will paradoxically -- if followed through to its end -- also bring the thing-in-itself (the ground beneath our feet) 'home' to architecture.(6)

It is Deleuze's *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*(7) that opened the floodgates of new-wave architecture in the early 1990s. Within this summary re-assessment of the arcane philosophy of Leibniz, Deleuze layed out a highly articulated reading of the theory of the monad and its relation to the world. The monad is the intensely calibrated inner world of "inconspicuous perceptions" where a map of the world exists in a form wholly derived from almost-unconscious impressions folded into its dark interior and completely disconnected from any object *other than itself*. (Holderlin in his tower, the walls plastered with maps ...) It is from these impressions that cognition rays forth and all "differential relations" are established. From within this interior world cognition forms associations with the "remarkable and the notable" -- viz., it re-configures the world. Deleuze calls this interior map the "obscure dust of the world" which might be presumed to intentionally echo Saussure's "linguistic dust"

which implied an incidental doubling of linguistic structures. It is with Deleuze's proposed series of "filters" (which begin to "normalize" things) that we might infer the emergence of the architectonic -- extension, measure, and the framing of perception. The tautological rapture of Narcissus is an alternative path.

Deleuze also sets out the difference between the calculus of Leibniz and that of Newton. Whereas Leibniz realized that calculus ultimately refers back to the monadic (and psychic mechanisms), Newtonian calculus focussed on physical mechanisms and gave to us the so-called clockwork universe. Leibniz's physics, however, always referred back to his metaphysics. For Leibniz, the monad begins to "suffer" when the world is inverted and psychic mechanisms are turned into reflections of a purely mechanical nature. To simply reverse this situation produces solipsism. What is required instead is to disconnect the two entirely. Deleuze does so by emphasizing the completely autonomous nature of the monad. This is essentially a confirmation of the tenets of idealism.

There is also, in the image of the world gone awry, an intimation of an incipient (possible) gnosticism. Architecture may also be pictured as the purview of a demi-urge.(8) Here appears the specter of an upside-down world, or an inside-out world. The fact that this fundamental characteristic of systems (including architectural systems) may also inflict pain recalls innumerable instances of Mannerist architectures, where the subject seeks to escape the highly formalized structures (and strictures) of dogma and canon. This exact process has been underway for decades since the collapse of modernism, and the current fascination of the arts for complexity, obscurity, and the necessarily inarticulate nature of emergent new form is less a morbid symptom of that collapse than an indication of all that is struggling to rise through the debris.(9)

TRIPLICITIES - THIS, THAT, AND THE OTHER THING - PHILOSOPHY, ART, ARCHITECTURE - SUMMARY JUDGEMENT

And what is here? In the metaphor of architecture as frozen music? Is it not the insight that architecture is inanimate music, the total work of art petrified? And what is below that? Is it not that the total work of art is a totally subjectivized topology? The shape of things and ideas? The secret meeting-place of subject and object? The source-code for the world? What is it that runs through all works of the imaginative spirit but this? Through the mysterious and gnostic *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*? Through Goethe, Fichte, Schelling? Through Leibniz, Kant, Heidegger? Through Hegel, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein? Through Shakespeare, Brecht, Stoppard? Through Tarkovsky, Kieslowski, Godard? What is underneath the surface of language and things? Is it the secret substrate that animates Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman? Is it the same thing turned inside-out in Baudelaire, Poe, Nerval, Freud, Lacan? What is IT? Is IT not Self, not-ego? What moves in Kazantzakis moves in Novalis. Philosophy, art, architecture moves to the perturbations of ground, as waves move within the sea -- i.e., that thing which renders all of the words above and below useless.(10)

Gavin Keeney (September 2002)

ENDNOTES

"When we speak the word 'life', it must be understood we are not referring to life as we know it from its surface of fact, but to that fragile, fluctuating center which forms never reach. And if there is still one hellish, truly accursed thing in our time, it is our artistic dallying with forms, instead of being like victims burnt at the stake, signaling through the flames."

-- Antonin Artaud (1938)

1 - Koolhaas' project for the city of London (with Elia Zenghelis, Madelon Vriesendorp, and Zoe Zenghelis) is part of the exhibition "Perfect Acts of Architecture" currently on display at AXA Gallery, New York. See [Exhibitions/Events](#). This exhibition, which re-presents linguistics-inspired works of architecture from the 1970s and early 1980s, might best have been called "Perfect Acts of Axonometric Drawing", or "Left-Leaning Architectures", as it showcases the agonistic elan of isometric and axonometric drawing. Axonometric drawing is said to have originated with Raphael's surveys of the ruined monuments (moments) of Rome. Included is *Chamberworks* (1983), a suite of 28 precise and obsessive drawings by Daniel Libeskind from his time as head of the architecture department at Cranbrook Academy. These drawings in many ways present the "debris field" of architecture, with trajectories going nowhere, forms piled upon forms or adrift in the architectural aether, and provisional (seemingly accidental) recombinations of typological fragments held "in tension" by unseen/undisclosed forces. *Chamberworks: Architectural Meditations on the Themes from Heraclitus* was published in a folio version by the Architectural Association (London, 1984). This work also appears in *The Space of Encounter* (Universe, 2000) with a surrealist, running commentary by Libeskind. In a lecture delivered in Berlin, in 1997, Libeskind described the origin of these drawings as his unresolved passion for both music and architecture. Of the latter, he also admits: "The ground of architecture that I have always been interested in was the ground that was not really available for it." (p. 52)

2 - The author has read through the Ernst Cassirer papers at the Beinecke Library at Yale University, and, yes, Cassirer's lecture notes make this claim. Cassirer, and post-Kantians in general, seemed motivated by the dictates of early structuralism to find a meta-art-history that might account for the oppositions of art-historical scholarship, a path similar to that of Heinrich Wölfflin and the Vienna School c.1900. See Rostislav Švácha, "The Architects Have Overslept: Space As a Construct of Art Historians, 1888-1914", *Umení/Art* XLIX, 2001, No. 6

3 - Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 2

4 - Freud's idea of sublimation derives from his theory of the upright subject. This idea is traced in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. His grandson, Lucien, has curiously reversed this line of thought through his horizontal, nude studies of the human subject. See [Lucien Freud @ the Tate](#) and [The Naked and the Living](#), a review, in *The Observer* (06/09/02).

5 - The term chiasmus might best be described as two narrative lines that appear to diverge but secretly agree to meet at a predetermined 'time and place', i.e., in the term 'chiasmus'.

6 - In *Noble Truths, Beautiful Lies, and Landscape Architecture* (Master's thesis, Cornell, 1993), the author summarized the vicissitudes of late-modernist architectural rhetoric, coming to the conclusion, then, that "elsewhere will the new appear". This "elsewhere" now seems to be upon us, yet, as always, it is at risk and may be engulfed by the unrepentant orders of the not-quite banished instrumentalities (and mentalities) of late-modernism.

7 - Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). Deleuze's concept of the monad owes as much to Heidegger as to Leibniz, and his description of this interior shadow-world is clearly a re-writing of Plato's idea of the cave (a problem also tackled head-on by Heidegger in his discussion of *Alétheia* -- i.e., self-showing, disclosure, and etc.). In Heidegger's exegesis hiddenness and unhiddenness are a function of temporality, as set, and as such lead straight to the concept/problem of historicity. See Catherine Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos* (1996). "Thus, have we experienced, in view of 'Alétheia' [Alétheia, Heraklit, Fragment 6], that with it our thinking is called to correspond to something which from before the beginning of 'philosophy' and through the whole course of its history, has already drawn thought to itself. 'Alétheia' is the historical course of philosophy anticipated, but in such a way that it withholds itself from philosophical determination, as that which requires thoughtful consideration [Erörterung]. Thus 'Alétheia' remains for us the worthiest of thought -- of thought delivered from the metaphysically conveyed retrospective view of the representation of 'truth' in the sense of correctness and 'being' in the sense of actuality." Martin Heidegger, "Hegel and the Greeks" (1958). The essential point here might simply be that when something is revealed (brought forward) it relies on all that is not brought forward (remains unrevealed). This is the sense of Deleuze's comment "Clarity endlessly plunges into obscurity." The spirit of subject-object relations permeates Gaston Bachelard's *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* (Beacon Press, 1964) and comes to an apotheosis in "Idealized Fire". "Our book will then appear as a specimen of a whole series of studies, mediating subject and object, which could be undertaken to show the fundamental influence on the life of the mind of certain meditations aroused by objects." (p. 102) Bachelard (writing in 1938) is concerned with a type of deep-sea diving that returns objective orders to their base in subjective orders. A type of projective geometry, this practice discerns in the object all the formative forces that produce it, and upon which it relies and returns. This is the perfect analog for architecture, which is *never* autonomous despite all rationalist and utilitarian claims otherwise. Bachelard assembles a stinging critique of 'objectivity' through what Northrop Frye, in the preface, calls "a basis for a systematic development of the critical study of the arts." The apotheosis noted above comes about when Bachelard turns to Novalis, and, in the closing chapter "Idealized Fire", when he deploys the key terminologies of *dialectical sublimation* and *continuous sublimation*. The latter is the territory of the Freudian Thing (the Lacanian Thing), the former is the to-and-fro of the primordial subject-object dialectic -- the archaic, secret landscape below the modern construct of the self-referential Ego. In the latter, and in the case of intellectual fire, the "*agreeable takes precedence over the useful*". Here, Bachelard reverses all utilitarian interpretations of mythic formulae to show that the roots of objective experience penetrate the most abstruse and obscure substrata of the elemental experience of the world. This is, in a sense, the cause célèbre of all "*poetic diagrams*". He closes with a poetic fragment from Paul Eluard: "In the bright crystal of your eyes / Show the havoc of fire, show its inspired works / And the paradise of its ashes".

8 - For traces of the demi-urge in architecture, one only need look at the works of Piranesi, Bataille, Baltrusaitis, Perez-Gomez, and El-Khoury to see the monstrous and distended figure of architecture as prison-house (as a form of despotism). William Blake's visionary universe is an exemplary instance of a place set up in the margins of this place (this world), and, as de Certeau suggests, as a form of *compensation* -- i.e., a parallel world detectable in the traces of this-world-gone-awry. Needless-to-say, any survey of the "ontological ground beneath our feet" automatically includes ethics and a critique of forms of hegemony. For a masterful appropriation/expropriation of Bataille's concept

of the *informe*, see Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (Zone, 1997). For comments on this text, see "Evidentiary Outtakes" in [Landscape + Architecture](#) (Samizdat).

9 - A few of the operative texts in this latter-day revolution in morphological and topological matters (literal and figurative) include: George Baird, *The Space of Appearance* (1995); Bernard Cache, *Earth Moves* (1995); Daniel Libeskind, *The Space of Encounter* (2000); Greg Lynn, *Animate Form* (1999); Alberto Perez-Gomez & Louise Pelletier, *Architectural Representation and the Perspective Hinge* (1997); Michael Sorkin, *Wiggle* (1998); Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987); John Rajchman & Paul Virilio *Constructions* (1998); Sanford Kwinter, *Architectures of Time* (2001); and Ignasi de Sola-Morales et alia, *Differences* (1996). Landscape architecture, primarily mired in a non-reflective place and only enlivened by pop manifestations of a faux avant-garde sensibility, remains beholden to architecture for its theoretical and/or critical operations. This is perhaps appropriate since it will never be *very much at all* until it merges with architecture. An exception is James Corner et alia's *Recovering Landscape* (1999). The recent acclamation (noise) surrounding landscape urbanism is primarily a fetishizing of infrastructure and post-industrial wreckage. The recent Van Alen Institute's Queens Plaza Design Ideas Competition (1991-2) -- an avalanche of proposals from around the world for a dysfunctional transit complex in New York City -- is evidence of the persistence of superurbanism in place of anything vital, and incorporates an urban supergraphics in the form of entropic, electronic hypertextuality as a new sublime. Movements in landscape architecture steering clear of the infrastructural sublime are more readily found in the realm of post-conceptual art -- a continuation and attenuation of Land Art and post-minimalism.

10 - Summary judgements take many forms. One of the best might be constructed from bits of a passage from Lacan's "The Freudian Thing", an essay based on a 1955 lecture delivered in Vienna and published in *Ecrits* (Norton, 1977). "Here the big clogs move forward to cover the dove's feet, on which, as we know, the truth is borne, and on occasion to swallow up the bird as well [...]"

Psychoanalysis is the science of the mirages that appear within. A unique experience, a rather abject one after all, but one that cannot be recommended too highly to those who wish to be introduced to the principle of [hu]man[kind]'s follies, for, by revealing itself as akin to a whole gamut of disorders, it throws light upon them [...]" (p. 119) The thing speaks: "So for you I am the enigma of her who vanishes as soon as she appears, men who try so hard to hide me under the tawdry finery of your proprieties! [...] Where, then, will I pass into you? Where was I before I entered you? Perhaps one day I will tell you?" (p. 121) Lacan projects this 'voice' of truth, as a psychoanalytic signifier, a Diotima, appearing and disappearing in the psycho-sexual discourse (his world). The problems associated with Lacan, and the reason to read Lacan without becoming a Lacanian, have to do with his interpretation of Freud's concept of the 'I' (the ego) as it comes to being in place of (dis-placing) the archaic Self. The 'I' becomes a 'thing' insofar as it confronts the world of things. This 'I' also, in its irreducible form, is the instrument of repression of 'ground'. Lacan, wicked polemicist that he was, neutralizes all objections to the supremacy of the 'I' since, in every sense, it is a new ground constructed by language, and a type of 'given' that anchors psychoanalysis in Freud's topographic model of psychic mechanisms. Lacan has harsh words for phenomenology, although he too works 'within' language. For Lacan, the soul appears as a phantasmatic, interior universe opposed by an equally phantasmatic Real. This is an excellent analog for seeing the architecture of architecture; i.e., for seeing architecture as a sign for 'ego', a sign of the mythic autonomy that severs form from ground. There are different models for 'reading form'. There is the psycho-sensuous, which Wölfflin and the Vienna School perfected; there is the political and

hegemonic reading, which Benjamin, Gramsci, and even Fico might be said to have developed; and there is the surreational (let's say, 'poetic') reading that phenomenology approached, and which had its most astute proponents in Heidegger, Focillon, and Bachelard. This latter method is the approach to a type of transcendental apperception (the psychoanalysis of forms), but without stopping there. It permeates both philosophy and metaphysics, as long as the former is not reduced to logical coordinates alone, and as long as the poetic returns in the transformation of the super-sensuous analytic wherein subject and object are understood to be one and the same thing.