

Lost History

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The act of defining history is charged with political issues. One might define history as "a chronological record of significant events." But which events can be deemed historically *significant*? Another definition speaks of history as "an established record." But what determines an *established* record? Architect John Hejduk and filmmaker Wim Wenders question the definition of history in their works, portraying history as a story of unfolding time which is neither chronological nor finished. Both purport that history is not something that is limited to the past, but a development that involves both everyday happenings and their interaction with memory. Their critique of the definition of history and questioning of the European historic canon is rooted in Walter Benjamin's "Third Thesis on the Philosophy of History," in which Benjamin argues that "a chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history." Who determines which events are recorded in history books? Who is memorialized? What actions are filmed? Where are monuments created? How do people engage history? These are the issues to which Benjamin refers, and the questions which Hejduk and Wenders ask in their works. Events deemed insignificant by some become fragments of lost history. These erasures are the subject matter of Hejduk's architectural project *Berlin Masque*, and Wenders' film *Wings of Desire*.

Both the project and the film begin with an understanding of history rooted in the definition of history as a tale or story that is created. The way in which people write history is integrally linked to the concerns of the present, and the present is itself a fleeting, ever-changing condition. Indeed, history is re-invented each time it is recorded or remembered. This temporal aspect of history is a fundamental element of the media of the two works: architecture and film. Considering the relationship of time to both architecture and cinema, David Shapiro says, "It has seemed to me for a long time worthwhile to consider architecture as one of the temporal arts, or perhaps the temporal art par excellence. Architecture demands a film, not a model.... John Hejduk seems to be one

of the few architects who understands the temporal poetics of architecture as an essential and necessary part of the act of refuge."² Hejduk's narrative architecture calls for a form of representation that embodies both space and time, a form that moves, like motion pictures.

The program for the International Building Exhibition 1981, the architectural competition for which the Berlin Masque was designed, opens with two readings from works by Italo Calvino and Honore de Balzac. Calvino describes the dichotomy between the past and present of a single city: "City after city may follow one upon the other on the same spot, with the same name, rising and falling with nothing to say to each other."³ Hejduk recognizes this phenomenon in Berlin, where the city's past is masked in the living of the present. He describes his aversion to this condition, and denounces it in a poem:

The unacceptability of the erasures
And of the unaccountable disappearances
Wherever and whenever
Throughout the world⁴

The first page of the Berlin Masque as it is published in Hejduk's *Mask of Medusa* reads much like a cinema marquee. The title "Berlin Masque" is followed by a subtitle: "'A Contemporary Masque' with Structures." These structures are immediately thrown into the role of theatrical characters as Hejduk begins the personification of the pieces of the masque which he calls "elements/structures." The next figures on the page are three geometric masks: circle, square, triangle. The architect describes these as the masks which members of a silent audience will wear. These geometric masks cover the inhabitants' faces, dominating the forms of the buildings. In this way, the architect blurs the distinction between the human and structural components of the masque, for both the human inhabitants and the buildings are masked in geometric forms. The last element on the introductory page of the masque is a list of its characters, comprising seven towers, three theaters, a book market, a maze, a Masque (this is an individual element not to be confused with the entirety

of the project), a bridge, a passage, housing, and individual work places. Hejduk has named his cast members, but he has not articulated their individual characteristics.

The next segment of the Masque describes the structures in greater detail. Once again, Hejduk lists his characters, but this list includes a written description of each structure alongside a diagrammatic sketch which begins to outline its form. Hejduk describes various aspects of each element: its location, the materials from which it is made, and its function. Following these descriptions are two poems, "Berlin Winter Masque" and "Berlin Looms." The rest of the published work consists of photographs of Hejduk's Berlin sketchbook, detailed drawings of the Masque, a photograph of a three-dimensional model of the entire project, and a number of freehand sketches which form another narrative describing the formal genesis of the project. These sketches, riddled with images of animals and mythical creatures, trace the history of the forms that Hejduk employs. Angels, medusas, snakes, lions, and satyrs all appear. Dominating the sketches of the elements/structures are the two-dimensional platonic forms of circle, square and triangle.

Hejduk assembles his cast upon two city blocks which were once the site of a World War II torture chamber. He covers the ground with granite blocks, but then he punctures the surface with holes for planting areas, scattering clay planting pots upon the surface in order "to cover the site — with whispers — six inches above the Earth."⁵ This becomes the first way Hejduk reveals the past life of the site. By injecting multiple openings into this surface, he enables the past to show itself, to grow. It cannot and will not be covered up in Hejduk's "search towards the possibility of renewal ... a program that perhaps had something to do with the spirit of our times."

As architect Raphael Moneo says, "The city for Hejduk is continually transformed: it is diverse, alive, changing. It responds to an infinite number of solicitations that are immediately reflected in its form." The "solicitations" to which Moneo refers are the actions of the city's residents. The Berlin Masque is a project where people and elements/structures interact and engage in reading, writing, and reciting the city's everchanging history. This interaction between a city, its citizens, and their memories is a theme also explored by filmmaker Wim Wenders in *Wings of Desire*. Indeed, *Wings of Desire* can be seen as the model that the Berlin Masque demands. The works, both sited in Berlin, explore the relationship of the city to its past. As the works unfold, it becomes clear that both Wenders and Hejduk share a desire: they call for the recording and the recognition of everyday events. This message is especially poignant in Berlin, a city that still suffers from the destruction of W.W.II. Speaking of Berlin, Wenders explains:

There is more reality in Berlin than in any other city.
It's more a SITE than a CITY.
To live in the city of undivided truth, to walk around with
the invisible ghosts of the future and the past...
That's my desire, on the way to becoming a film.⁸

The four primary characters in *Wings of Desire* are Daniel and Cassiel, two angels; Marian, a trapeze artist; and Peter Falk, an actor who was once an angel. The plot revolves around Daniel's love for Marian and his decision to forego celestial existence in favor of human mortality. At issue is the difference between the angels' and humans' attitudes toward everyday life and its relationship to the past. While the angels record and recite human activity in minute detail, the people are largely disinterested in documenting everyday activities. This existential rift between the angels, who record life but cannot experience it, and the humans, who are unable to connect with their past, is the primary difference between Wenders' film and Hejduk's project. Wenders' characters long to overcome their isolation, yet seem utterly incapable of communicating with one another. Hejduk, on the contrary, provides the inhabitants of his Masque with every opportunity to read, write, and recite events both as they occur and after they have happened. The irony of *Wings of Desire* is that Wenders himself accomplishes what his characters cannot: he chronicles life while living it, and provides a film which forever captures the angst created by the inability to write history.

The angels of *Wings of Desire* can be understood as the embodiment of Berlin itself. While the city physically reveals its history, the angels record memories in written form. The city is memory, and there is a memory of the city. A third mnemonic character in the film is the storyteller, who verbally recounts his memories of Berlin while wondering if anyone will listen to his tales. As old as cinema itself, the storyteller was both man and angel. Angels write history, the storyteller recites history, and the city physically reveals history. *Wings of Desire* is Wenders' last word, recording memory in a spatial and temporal form.

The film opens with a shot of a hand in the process of writing. The introductory credits roll, and then fade into a view of the sky. The camera cuts to an eye; at this point the camera eye is understood to embody angelic vision, which is immediately put into motion: it begins by zooming over the streets of Berlin. This is the film at its best: soaring above, through, and across the city in sweeping panoramas while pausing to note singular details. The camera first stops to focus upon the angel Daniel standing atop the ruin of the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church. Wenders catches the angel's eye by engaging it in a visual discourse with a child standing below on the street. This visual dialogue is Wenders' first reference to the Angelus Novus of Walter Benjamin. Casting angels as chroniclers of history, and children as the voices of the future, the film initiates a discourse on time. The angels are witnesses to the wreckage that is the city of Berlin; however, they resist the storm of progress by lingering with the city's inhabitants. Wenders' angels have what the Angelus Novus does not: a historical task. As Cassiel reminds Daniel, it is the angels' duty "to observe, collect, testify, preserve." Unlike the Angelus Novus, though, the angels in *Wings of Desire* are not powerless to affect the future. Their commitment to writing empowers them with a historical task

that can indeed have future impact. Although this impact is never made upon the human characters in the film, it immediately registers with the film's audience.

"In 1921 Walter Benjamin bought Paul Klee's aquarelle *Angelus Novus*:"¹⁰ This is the first clear utterance emerging from the indecipherable mist of readers' murmurs in the library as soon as the angels enter it. Indeed, as the angels enter the library, it is transformed into a chapel in which the angels worship the written word. Wenders makes clear that writing is the religion of the angels.

In their initial dialogue, Cassiel and Damiel reveal the events they are recording. As Cesare Casarino recognizes, "Although the angels in *Wings & Desire* witness and remember the 'great' events of history, it is not this history of 'great' events which they record. It is the minor epiphanies of everyday life which they transcribe, from the transient language of momentary experience, into the enduring language of (scriptural) writing."¹¹

Hejduk, too, implements a theatrical form, the Masque, to mnemonically recall the history of his project's site. He said that the Masques called for the invention of new programs,¹² inventions that originate in the physical world where realities are so often masked. It is the exposure of hidden reality that Hejduk achieves in his Masques; they fulfill his desire to uncover new programs in architecture. Describing this process of invention, Hejduk says that "The many masks of apparent reality have made me wonder, speculate and ponder about the revealed and the unrevealed."¹³ Hejduk is examining the differences between the "revealed and the unrevealed" as they are *determined* by "masks" of "apparent reality." It is this investigation which questions the way in which history is represented, and draws attention to the subjective nature of the field.

The elements/structures which Hejduk includes in the Berlin Masque reveal that he, too, sees an importance in the witnessing of both "great historical moments" and everyday occurrences. The function of elements such as the Wind Tower, Bell Tower, and Water Tower are fairly straightforward: they mark the everyday events in the life of the city. The streamers atop the Wind Tower flutter when the wind blows, and the Bell Tower calls attention to moments in time through its tolling. Hejduk is visually and audibly marking the passage of time. In the Observation Tower and Watch Tower, Hejduk simply calls for people to look at the city. Allowing people to look across the wall which lacerates the city, the towers' meaning is not so benign. People are free to enter these towers at any time and stay as long as they wish; however, they must always *be* while inside. The plan of the towers is clear, but the experience of inhabiting them is uncomfortable. In these towers Hejduk forces people to see that the place in which they dwell has been profoundly affected by war. The city suffers from an amputation; it has been cut in two.

While Hejduk uses towers to give the citizens of Berlin a heightened perspective of their city, Wenders enlists angelic vision in his soaring aerial shots of Berlin. Wenders initially

intended to entitle his film *The Sky over Berlin*, explaining that "The sky is maybe the only thing that unites these two cities, apart from their past"¹⁴ Traveling with the angels, the spectator of *Wings & Desire* is taken inside the minds of the citizens of the city.

After the film's opening visual dialogue between Damiel and the child, the camera zooms down to eavesdrop on a bicyclist's thoughts: "At last mad, at last redeemed," a woman exclaims. From this scene on the ground, the angel ascends to the sky, pausing to enter an airplane full of the murmurs of its passengers' internal voices. After an initial encounter with Peter Falk, the angel leaves the passenger plane and circles a radio tower, which bombards celestial passers-by with the sounds of its emissions. Descending once again, the camera enters an apartment building where a man laments that there is still nothing decent on television. Another man comments indifferently on the death of his mother, who was an avid collector of memorabilia. Finally, parents lament the difficulty they have in communicating with their adolescent son. What the spectator sees is more than the random thoughts of miscellaneous citizens of Berlin; Wenders has chosen his characters carefully. They all depict loss. In watching this film, "We lose ourselves into the minute labyrinths of streets and people's thoughts. There is a profound sadness in the beauty of this hovering and gliding above the city and plunging into its midst, as if they were attempts to commemorate something about to disappear, to capture something in its last instant, as if every moment were the last moment."²³

Hejduk does not view the passing of time with the sense of isolation expressed in *Wings & Desire*. Wenders' angels record history, but they do not convey it to the living inhabitants of Berlin. In this way, Wenders establishes a rift between human existence and the memory and recording of history. He explains that the "past keeps appearing to the angels on their turns through present-day Berlin Incorporeal and timeless, this yesterday is still present everywhere, as a 'parallel world'."¹⁶ Hejduk, on the contrary, sees time as a plastic, cyclical process. Peter Eisenman once asked Hejduk, "What happens when the people die?" Hejduk responded, "They go on living there."¹⁷ In the Berlin Masque, Hejduk emphasizes the fact that humans continuously go in and out of the past and future, cyclically.¹⁸ The present is defined only by motion: the passage from past to future. In this way Hejduk reveals that the essence of dwelling is transience. This transience is illustrated in the Clock Tower of the Berlin Masque, which is envisioned by Hejduk as:

A way of seeing time. A square blank surface travels over time/ For example, when it is five o'clock the square blank surface covers the number five: blocking it out so to speak, or we can not see fixed time, or feel the present, we are simply in motion.¹⁹

As a foundation for his body of architectural works, Hejduk designs what he describes as a troupe of characters who may accompany him from site to site, from project to project. Hejduk expresses the necessity for the creation of one

such character, The Clock Tower, by saying, "I am obsessed with time and have recently created time-pieces ... clock towers. One of my recurrent persistences is that present time cannot be seen ... present time has an opacity ... present time is opaque ... present time erases ... blanks out time"²⁰ The Clock tower is perhaps the most notable of Hejduk's troupe of characters, and an independent version of it was constructed in London at the Architectural Association. Even while the tower was being erected on this particular site, Hejduk imagined its moving to future sites: specifically, to Berlin, within the Berlin Masque, and to Venice, alongside the Thirteen Watchtowers of Cannareggio. To emphasize the transient nature of the tower, Hejduk mounts it not on a secured foundation, but on steel wheels that rest on railroad tracks. The primacy of motion is further elaborated in the movement of the timepiece itself. What is understandable in the tempest of present time is simply the permanence of motion.

By showing that present views can blank out past experiences, Hejduk depicts a longing to reveal lost history in order to experience time. This is also the ultimate desire of Wenders' angels, who "witness and fulfill (even though in the image of a fleeting moment) a desire to break away, a will to resist. These acts of resistance are the punctuations and caesurae of the (otherwise undifferentiated) monotonies of the city's everyday life ... The epiphanies which the angels record ... are isolated revelatory moments."²¹ These fleeting moments are echoed in the singular experiences Hejduk offers the inhabitants of his towers. Indeed, the inhabitants of Hejduk's towers share the isolation of Wenders' angels, for the pleasure Daniel and Cassiel experience in recounting these collected daily fragments derives from their desire to experience the human present.

While Hejduk's Masque presents a variety of ways of representing time and its relation to the past, Wenders focuses primarily on reading, writing, and reciting to engage history. Wenders devotes the first essay in *The Logic of Images* to a simple question: why make films? He explains:

Well, because...Something happens, you see it happening, you film it as it happens, the camera sees it and records it, and you can look at it again, afterwards. The thing itself may no longer be there, but you can still see it, the fact of its existence hasn't been lost. The act of filming is a heroic act (not always, not often, but

sometimes). For a moment, the gradual destruction of the world of appearances is held up. The camera is a weapon against the tragedy of things, against their disappearing. Why make films? Bloody stupid question!²²

In the Berlin Masque and *Wings of Desire*, Hejduk and Wenders experience the present by transforming the invisible into the visible. They take the ruin of Berlin, still divided as they created their works, and poignantly describe the city *as it is*. Insisting on recognizing the destruction of war, they use the rubble of the city to create poetry anew. In their glaring examinations of Berlin, they study "last things and speak of things that might last."²³ In so doing, they redefine history as the chronicle of events that includes rather than omits, and reveal lost history.

NOTES

- ¹ Walter Benjamin, trans. Harry Zohn, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 254.
- ² Robert Shapiro in John Hejduk *The Collapse of Time* (London: E.G. Bond, Ltd, 1987), unpaginated.
- ³ Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1974), p. 31.
- ⁴ John Hejduk, *Victims* (London: Spin Offset, 1986), unpaginated.
- ⁵ Hejduk, *Victims*, unpaginated.
- ⁶ Hejduk, John. *Mask of Medusa*. (New York: Rizzoli, 1985), p. 138.
- ⁷ Raphael Moneo, in John Hejduk, *Bovisa* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1987), unpaginated.
- ⁸ Wim Wenders, trans. Michael Hoffman, *The Logic of Images* (Boston: faber and faber, 1991), p. 74.
- ⁹ Wim Wenders, *Wings of Desire*, Produced and directed by Wim Wenders, 130 min, *Argos Films* (1987), Film.
- ¹⁰ Casarino, "Fragments on *Wings of Desire* (or, fragmentary representation as historical necessity)" *Social Text* (1990), p. 170.
- ¹¹ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 257.
- ¹² Hejduk, *Mask*, p. 68.
- ¹³ Hejduk, *Mask*, p. 68.
- ¹⁴ Wenders, *Logic*, p. 75.
- ¹⁵ Casarino, *Social Text*, p. 175.
- ¹⁶ Wenders, *Logic*, p. 80.
- ¹⁷ Hejduk, *Mask*, p. 86.
- ¹⁸ Hejduk, *Mask*, p. 59.
- ¹⁹ Hejduk, *Mask*, p. 141.
- ²⁰ Hejduk, *Collapse*, unpaginated.
- ²¹ Casarino, *Social Text*, p. 171.
- ²² Wenders, *Logic*, p. 1.
- ²³ Robert Shapiro in Hejduk, *Collapse*, unpaginated.