

Adolf Loos and the Aphoristic Style: Rhetorical Practice in Early Twentieth- Century Modern Architecture

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Adolf Loos is widely regarded as one of the prophets of the modern movement in architecture. Successive generations of twentieth-century scholars and architects have treated Loos with varying degrees of sophistication, either analyzing his buildings as expressions of his cultural polemics, or connecting him loosely with other Viennese cultural innovators, or mining his writings for justifications of new directions in late twentieth-century architecture. No work, however, has undertaken a systematic examination of Loos's uses of language.

Loos's early and formative writings place him in a significant relation to a group known as the Viennese "language circle" because of their commitment to language as a tool of cultural reform. The intellectual historian William Johnston, author of *The Austrian Mind*, refers to Loos's associates such as the writer Karl Kraus as one of several Viennese "therapeutic nihilists," to the poet Peter Altenberg as an "expert at dissimulation" and to the philosopher of language Ludwig Wittgenstein, who designed his own house after being inspired by Loos's ideas, as "a utopian and therapeutic nihilist at once."

These figures shared a cultural and social matrix that has been characterized by an array of historians of Vienna as being highly "theatrical," and though the term is significant, it is also used very differently by different scholars.¹ In works by Carl Schorske, Donald Olsen, and Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, for example, Viennese tendencies toward performance and theatricality could be seen spilling over into the journalism, café culture, and street life of the city. Other historians, like Edward Timms and Michael Steinberg, have interpreted tendencies toward Viennese theatricality much more darkly. To Timms, the imprint of Viennese theatricality ran so deep as to amount to a system of "structural dissembling" that was reproduced at all levels of political, economic, and social life. In Michael Steinberg's view, theatricality denotes the settings and rituals of a centuries-old ideological technique — crucial for the maintenance of the multi-national Hapsburg empire — with roots in Catholic baroque culture. Whether in the staged buildings of the Ringstrasse, or in the rituals of the court, military aristocracy, and opera house,

Vienna fostered a culture of theatricality that these historians describe as part and parcel of daily life for Vienna's middle, upper, and ruling classes.

In view of these historical accounts, it is easier to understand Adolf Loos's contemporary denunciations of a culture that embraced so much historicist ornament that it threatened the very idea of a modern culture. His buildings, in part, were a critique of an urbanity Loos regarded as intrusive and grossly out of step with the times. As other scholars have pointed out, Loos, Wittgenstein and Karl Kraus thematized "the limits of language" by constructing an ethical critique of Viennese social practices.³ Loos's relatively blank exteriors in architecture, the "silences" of Wittgenstein's language philosophy, and Kraus's denunciations of print media conventionalism in his one-man journal, *The Torch* (*Die Fackel*) sought collectively to remove superfluous elements from a culture seen as carnivalesque and debased.⁴

To Adolf Loos the writer, however, this very same Viennese theatrical tradition left an indelible imprint on his ironic, aphoristic, and at times incendiary prose style. Loos's writing has been characterized by the architectural historian Reyner Banham as typically consisting of "not a reasoned argument but a succession of fast-spielend double-takes and non-sequiturs holding together a precarious rally of clouds of witness — café Freudianism, café-anthropology, (and) café criminology..."⁵ To what can we attribute the difference between Loos' austere, even "silent" buildings, and the highly 'ornamented' and theatrical quality of his writings? If there is a connection between aphorism and ornament, how should we understand the seeming contradiction between Loos's writing style and his architecture?

Where Loos's architecture flatly rejected the staged historicism that was common in Vienna's central first district and its surrounding Ringstrasse, his written and spoken words embraced fully the theatrical milieu of Vienna's *fin de siècle* public sphere, at the same time using it against itself. As listeners and reviewers were fond of pointing out, Loos and his partner on the Central European lecture circuit, the writer and cultural critic Karl Kraus, did not lecture so much as "perform" entertaining critiques of contemporary language,

customs, and morals. Within Vienna's urban nucleus of cafés and close-knit, overlapping social networks, their performances mobilized entertainment to heighten the impact of an ultimately ethical message, a call for the Viennese to shake off the trappings of historical ornament and imperial custom in order to address modern conditions as enlightened city dwellers.

Architectural historian Stanford Anderson has argued that Loos's architectural breakthrough consisted of developing a critical awareness of how competing conventions and practice could constructively criticize one another.⁶ Loos's writings, I would add, dismantle and reconstitute the reader's understanding within a dense narrative of aphorisms, hyperbole, and theatrical gestures. This writing style represents a radical abandonment of usual notions of narrative time; this narrative structure exemplifies Loos's program for simultaneous awareness of past and present in actual social practice. Seeking to "innoculate" his students of architecture against the mindless copying of classicism, Loos maintained that "The present constructs itself on the past just as the past constructed itself on the preceding past. It has never been another way — nor will it ever be any other way."⁷ Loos's aphoristic style — exemplified in "Ornament and Crime" but appearing with equal force in many of his other essays — refused to argue linearly or synthetically, or to affirm a false wholeness between the realms of form and life. Instead, as the architectural theorist Massimo Cacciari has pointed out, Loos's aphorisms functioned in much the same fashion as Nietzsche's "tragic quips" — as post-systemic thinking in which the "suspended dialectics" of art and industry, art and handicraft, and interior and exterior serve a potentially liberating end.⁸ Echoing Cacciari, the theorist K. Michael Hays argues that Loos's rhetorical effects are indicative of the same "highly differentiated subjectivity" that has material analogues for Loos in the "insuperable partitions between languages of form" (such as photography, architecture, etc.).⁹

The success of Loos's autonomous narrative logic, which I am suggesting embodied his theory of culture in form and content, derives in large part from the architect's participation in the Viennese milieu of theatricality. The leaders in this milieu formed a constellation of actors whose self-conscious roles were assumed for the express reason, it was felt, that dramatic personae could mount more effective attacks on Viennese culture. Thus, the wandering aphorist-poet and feuilletonist Peter Altenberg, one of Loos's closest friends, followed the motto "To live artistically," adapted from Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*. Altenberg's reputation and work has led the historian William Johnston to characterize the poet's café behavior and live and written performances as a "walking kaleidoscope of worldviews."¹⁰ Karl Kraus, a complex figure who actually denigrated the feuilleton, Loos's preferred writing genre, for its violation of his language-based ethics, nevertheless admitted to writing his aphoristic journal, *The Torch* [Die Fackel] "as an actor" whose utter conviction in the act of performing was meant to convert his masked persona into a "real identity."¹²

To conclude, Carl Schorske's classic work on *fin-de-siècle* Vienna thematizes this city as an "infinite whirl of innovation" in which modern ideas appeared against the background of a fading Habsburg Empire. Yet many Viennese innovations contained significant continuities with the past, for example, in the debt that aphorisms owe to the Romantic tradition of what is known as the literary "fragment." One prominent theory of late eighteenth-century German Romanticism goes so far as to maintain that

The motif of the unification of the Ancient and Modern, as it appears so often in the fragments, always refers to the necessity of bringing about a rebirth of ancient naiveté according to modern poetry."

A critical modern awareness is evident here in these eighteenth-century roots of the German-speaking world's aphoristic style, containing a conception of historical simultaneity and perspective that resurfaces through figures like Nietzsche to influence the literature of Kraus and the writings, and even the book titles, of Adolf Loos.¹⁴ Following a century of modernization and fragmentation in the Habsburg Empire of the nineteenth century, Adolf Loos re-taped these Romantic roots at the opening of the twentieth century. His theory of modern culture, in fact, is nicely encapsulated by historian Jonathan Crary's characterization of the nineteenth century as a whole. He writes: "...the destructive dynamism of modernization [in the nineteenth century] was also a condition for a vision that would resist its effects, a revivifying perception of the present caught up in its own historical afterimages."¹⁵ The figure of Adolf Loos reminds us that in our own era, among the most arresting visions of modernity are those that transfigure the fragmentation of the present into an intelligible pattern, a pattern somehow continuous with a meaningful past.

NOTES

- ¹ The labels for these three men are used in the work of William Johnston, *The Austrian Mind: An Intellectual and Social History 1848-1938* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1972), pp. 207, 223, 397. For another account see Dagmar Barnouw, "Loos, Kraus, Wittgenstein, and the Problem of Authenticity," in Gerald Chapple and Hans H. Schulte, eds., *The Turn of the Century: German Literature and Art, 1890-1915*, The McMaster Colloquium on German Studies II (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1981), pp. 249-273.
- ² Hermann Broch, *Hugo von Hofmannsthal And His Time: The European Imagination, 1860-1920* trans. by Michael P. Steinberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Jacques Le Rider, *Modernity and Crises of Identity: Culture and Society in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, trans. by Rosemary Morris (New York: Continuum, 1993); Kari Grimstad, *Masks of the Prophet: The Theatrical World of Karl Kraus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982); Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973); William Johnston, *The Austrian Mind* (note 1); Donald J. Olsen, *The City as a Work of Art: London, Paris, Vienna* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), esp. the chapter, "Vienna: Display and Self-Representation," pp. 235-50; Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1981); Michael P. Steinberg, *The Meaning of the Salzburg Festival:*

Austria as Theater and Ideology, 1890-1938 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990); Edward Timms, *Karl Kraus, Apocalyptic Satirist: Culture and Catastrophe in Habsburg Vienna* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

- ³ William Johnston refers to this group's analysis of language through the exploration of the limits of its use as "therapeutic nihilism," since all three employed the techniques of a refined literalism to react to a culture by which they were "revulsed." Johnston, *The Austrian Mind*, pp. 203-207.
- ⁴ Barnouw, pp. 251-60; Schorske, pp. 339-40; Johnston, pp. 212-13.
- ⁵ Reyner Banham, "Ornament and Crime: The Decisive Contribution of Adolf Loos," *Architectural Review* (February 1957), p. 86.
- ⁶ Stanford Anderson, "Critical Conventionalism: Architecture," *Assemblage I* (1986), pp. 6-23, quoted in Stanford Anderson, "Critical Conventionalism: The History of Architecture," *Midgard: Journal of Architectural Theory and Criticism*, v.1 n.1 (1990), p. 47.
- ⁷ Adolf Loos, "My School of Architecture" ["Meine Bauschule"] (1913), in *Saemtliche Schriften* (Wien: Verlag Herold, 1962), p. 323.
- ⁸ Massimo Cacciari, *Architecture and Nihilism: On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 85, 106.
- ⁹ K. Michael Hays, *Modernism and the Posthumanist Subject: The Architecture of Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Hilbersheimer* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), p. 62.
- ¹⁰ Edward Timms, *Karl Kraus: Apocalyptic Satirist*, p. 194. Johnston, *The Austrian Mind*, p. 123. For a recent and in-depth account of Altenberg see Andrew Barker and Leo Lensing, *Peter Altenberg: Rezept die Welt zu Sehen* (Wien: Braumueller, 1995).
- ¹¹ Johnston, *The Austrian Mind*, p. 122.
- ¹² Significantly for Loos's own crusade, Kraus reprinted such Nietzschean aphorisms in a 1908 issue of *Die Fackel* as the definition of the artist as "a person for whom form is coextensive with content." Timms, p. 193. My discussion of theatricality has benefited greatly from the analysis of Timms, pp. 188-195.
- ¹³ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism* trans. by Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), p. 49.
- ¹⁴ For example, Loos's essay collection entitled *Trotzdem* is taken from Nietzsche's aphorism, "Das Entscheidende passiert trotzdem" [That which is decisive will occur in spite of everything] (translation by the author).
- ¹⁵ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), p. 21.