

The Uses of History

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I have often daydreamed of a lecture in which I compare the writings of Le Corbusier to those of Rem Koolhaas, specifically Le Corbusier's "Michael Angelo" from *Towards a New Architecture* with Koolhaas's "The House that Built Mies" from *S,M,L,XL*. These writings each concern a historical figure and an incomplete or unexecuted work. Further, they tell us more about the authors, their intention and era than about the historical figures who are the alleged subjects (or so I argue in this daydream). I also argue that these writings provide examples of how architects *use* history rather than *interpret* history. This, however, is where the similarities end. Le Corbusier's writings reveal a distinctly modern use of history and the architect's relationship to it. In contrast, Koolhaas's reveal a postmodern use; one which is particularly useful in opening the discourse of architectural history to new descriptions and vocabularies. But I am getting off the track. I am not really interested in either the daydream's subject matter or conclusions; rather, I am more interested in the manner in which I delivered the lecture.

In this daydream I see myself walking into a lecture room with a sack full of books which I place on the table next to the lectern. I then proceed to deliver the lecture by randomly picking books, opening them to random pages and choosing passages which I read. Some of these books I discard, others I comment on — saying a few words on how this or that passage relates to the other passages I have read. As I progress a stunning thing begins to occur, the random readings and my comments begin to create a cohesive, and (I must admit) provocative argument. For instance, in the daydream I choose Le Corbusier's *Towards a New Architecture*¹ which I open and read from the chapter "Michael Angelo." I then comment, saying how I thought that this passage revealed more about Le Corbusier and his era than about Michelangelo and the Renaissance.

I put aside Le Corbusier's book and choose a second: Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose*. I open to the postscript and read:

The past conditions us, harries us, blackmails us. The historic avant-garde [...] tries to settle scores with the past. "Down with the moonlight" — the futurist slogan — is a platform typical of the avant-garde; you have only to replace "moonlight" with whatever noun is suitable. The avant-garde destroys, defaces the past: Les Demoiselle d'Avignon is a typical avant-garde act."²

Again I comment; describing how this passage relates to Le Corbusier's. In my daydream I say: Le Corbusier's passage is also an avant-garde act which seeks to settle the score with the past. How can a piece of writing which speaks so highly of a historical figure serve to "deface" the past? Simple, Le Corbusier de-historicizing history. He removed Michelangelo from his time and place; consider: "The Renaissance did not produce Michael Angelo. It only produced a crowd of talented fellows"; or, "Michael Angelo is the

man of the last thousand years just as Phidias was the man of the thousand years before" or "We should not assert with too much conviction that the masses give raise to their man."³ Le Corbusier makes time, place and peers irrelevant. The creative genius of Michelangelo exists independent of Italy during the 16th century. From this what are we to say of Le Corbusier's obligation to history? Does he have any? Certainly; his obligation to history was to be independent of it.

I then pick from the bag Rem Koolhaas's *S,M,L,XL*⁴ and read the essay "The House that Built Mies." I remark on its similarities to Le Corbusier's (historical figures, etc.), adding that it too tells us more about Koolhaas and his time than Mies and modernism. Also, I note an obvious difference: Koolhaas's narrative structure; he is telling a story. I also ask: Is Koolhaas describing an obligation to history different from that of Le Corbusier's? Mies is depicted as seeing, in a full scale model of a house, the possibility of a new architectural vocabulary. That model house is designed in a historical style. Could this model house represents history? If so, Mies is reflecting on history; he is looking back and discovering unsuspected possibilities. Is Koolhaas suggesting that architects need not settle scores with history? Perhaps, but he is also suggesting more: the title of his essay is "The House that *Built* Mies." (my italics) which suggest that the architect is not creating the work but that the work is creating the architect. The past has a role in the formation of the architect and that architect's work. This is distinctly different from Le Corbusier's view of Michaelangelo and his work. For him, Michelangelo's "work is a creation not a Renaissance." It is new — "an arresting novelty in the dictionary of architecture" which "overshadows the classical epochs"⁵ — not a rejuvenation of an old idea. For Le Corbusier, the architect is an independent autonomous agent from whom creativity flows unencumbered. For Koolhaas, the architect and the architects ideas are as much a contingent construction as is his work.

Setting this aside, I choose (remember — randomly) *Rethinking Architecture* and open it to Gianni Vattimo's "The End of Modernity."⁶

Full of merit, yet poetically, man / Dwells on this earth. These lines [...] define the condition of man at the transition to the postmodern; the 'yet' is what signals the turn. One can think of modernity, then, as defined by a life "full of merit" — which is to say, full of activity. [...] Whereas modernity was characterized by an existence defined essentially in terms of projective activity and a drive toward the rationalization of reality by means of structures founded on thought and action, the postmodern would be that time when "poetic" characteristics are rediscovered. To dwell poetically does not mean to dwell in such a way the one needs poetry, but to dwell with a sensitivity

to the poetic, characterized by the impossibility, in a sense, of defining clear cut boundaries between reality and imagination.⁷

Projective activity is the second part to the modernism equation which leads to Le Corbusier's view of Michelangelo and his work. When added to the modernist view of history there results the concept of novelty; the concept that one may create something entirely new. This explains further Le Corbusier's view of Michelangelo's work as a "creation" not a "renaissance." Even his description of the unexecuted portions of St. Peter's as a "Wretched failure" defines him as modern. Why was this a failure? "It has become, sadly enough, a 'perhaps,' an 'apparently,' an 'it may be,' an 'I am not sure.'"⁸ These terms do not define a "projective activity" with which one can make things "real." "Perhaps" is tentative and stands opposite certainly, just as "apparently" or "it may be" stands to absolutely, and "I am not sure" stands to I am right. These terms define a hesitant, static position where one looks tentatively forward but also backward. On the other hand, for Koolhaas these words define a possible future success, not a failure. (Remember, the model house at which Mies looks remained unexecuted.) They define the imaginative process; that moment when something is considered as it has not been considered before and the tentative questions which arise from that moment regarding possibilities; "Perhaps" this could be that, or "It may be" possible. Koolhaas in his description of Mies is pledging his allegiance to Vattimo's "yet."

Then I choose another book: Dr. Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat*.⁹

The sun did not shine. / It was too wet to play. / So we sat in the house / All that wet day. / I sat there with Sally. / We sat there, we two. / And I said, 'How I wish / We had something to do! / Too wet to go out / And too cold to play ball. / We did nothing at all. / And then / Something went BUMP! / How that bump made us jump! / We looked! / Then we saw him step in on the mat! / We looked! / And we saw him! / The Cat in the Hat! / And he said to us, / "Why do you sit there like that? / I know its wet / And the sun is not sunny. / But we can have / Lots of fun that is funny!"¹⁰

I think: what in the world could this mean? But I am surprised to find myself saying: This is a portrait of the children of the enlightenment sitting on their hands; their "projective activities" stunned by the inclement weather of post-modernity. No longer do these children have skies made clear by the grand narratives under which they once innocently played — discovering intrinsic meanings, absolute truths, or essential properties. What are they to do? What are they to do? Enter the most absurd character: the Cat in the Hat — is this Koolhaas, Lyotard, Derrida (certainly not Rorty, he's too serious) — to teach the tullen children new games to play when "the sun is not so shiny?" These games are not so innocent — ridiculous balancing acts and the releasing of strange "things" from a hitherto unopened box.

And then another, Richard Rorty's essay in *Interpretation / Overinterpretation*.¹¹

[Eco] insist on making the distinction between interpreting texts and using texts. This, of course, is a distinction we pragmatist do not wish to make. On our view all anyone does is use it. Interpreting something, knowing it penetrating to its essence, and so on, are all just various ways of describing some process of putting it to work. [...] I was dismayed to find him insisting on a distinction similar to E.D. Hirsch's distinction between meaning and significance — a distinction between getting inside the text itself and relating the text to something else. This is exactly the sort of distinction anti-essentialists like me deplore — a distinction between inside and outside, between the non-relational and the relational features of something. For in our view there is no such thing as an intrinsic, non-relational property.¹²

This is the stage in which all description [...] are evaluated according to their efficacy as instruments for purposes, rather than by their fidelity to the object described.¹³

One of those needs, however, is to convince other people that we are right. So we pragmatists can view as the imperative to check our interpretations against the text as a cohesive whole simply as a reminder that, if you want to make your interpretation of a book seem plausible, you cannot just gloss over one or two lines or scenes. You have to say something about what most of the other lines or scenes are doing there.¹⁴

And another, Koolhaas's *Delirious New York*.¹⁵

The essence of paranoia is this intense - if distorted - relationship to the real world...[it] is the shock of recognition that never ends. As the name suggests, Dali's Paranoid-Critical Method is a sequence of two consecutive but discrete operations: 1. the synthetic reproduction of the paranoiac's way of seeing the world in the new light — with its rich harvest of unsuspected correspondences, analogies and patterns; and 2. the compression of these gaseous speculations to a critical point where they achieve the density of fact: the critical part of the method consists of the fabrications of objectifying 'souvenirs' of the paranoid tourism, of concrete evidence that brings the discoveries of those excursions back to mankind, ideally in the forms as obvious and undeniable as snapshots.

Paranoia is a delirium of interpretation. Each fact, event, force, observation is caught in one system of speculation and 'understood' by the afflicted individual in such a way that it absolutely confirms and reinforces his thesis - that is his initial delusion that is his point of departure. The paranoid always hits the nail on the head, no matter where the hammer blows fall.¹⁶

Rorty and Koolhaas seem to be using different terms to describing the same method. Koolhaas's term for Rorty's "purpose" is "delusion" — the initial thesis. Rorty's description of thoroughly examining the entire text to make an interpretation seem plausible is consistent with Koolhaas's second operation in the Paranoid Critical Method — the "critical" part in which speculations achieve the density of fact. Further, the PCM schema is remarkable similar to Rorty's use schema. Both have an initial purpose which will be verified though the "fabrication of objectifying souvenirs," what Rorty has called elsewhere the beating of texts into shapes which serve purposes. Finally, both schematas judge the interpretations in terms of their effectiveness in supporting an initial purpose/delirium.

In my daydream, I am beginning to run out of books. I choose one of the last, Lyotard's *Postmodern Fables*.¹⁷

After a short story or tale, sketch or exemplum, a moral draws out an unpretentious, localized, and provisional bit of wisdom, soon to be forgotten. [...] I would love to describe the present situation in a way that has nothing of critique, that was frankly representational, referential rather than reflective, hence naive and even puerile. Something like a tale told in the manner of Voltaire....In an informal fashion, of course, even a bit timid as if this were the unavowed dream of the postmodern world dreams about itself. A tale which, in sum, would be the narrative that the world persists in telling itself after the great narratives have obviously failed.¹⁸

The narrative form of Koolhaas's essay makes explicit the delirium. It exposes its own lack of intrinsic value and indicates to the reader that what is being told is a premeditated construction serving a purpose. The reader is at once enveloped by the narrative — inducing the reader to believe — and then distanced — inducing the reader to question what he/she has just decided to believe. In utilizing such a narrative structure Koolhaas limits his essay's

authority which becomes, like Lyotard's description above, "unpretentious, localized, and provisional." Also, it does not limit to a single use the work about which it speaks. The work remains open to dialog and available for other uses. The narrative is a sign of loyalty to the postmodern; a sign of dedication to the "yet."

I reach down and pick up the final book. It is again Eco's *The Name of the Rose*.¹⁹ How is this? I had taken it from the bag earlier. No matter, this is, after all, just a daydream. I read:

The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently. I think of the postmodern attitude as that of the cultivated man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows that he cannot say to her, "I love you madly," because he knows that she knows (that she knows he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, "As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly." At this point having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her, but that he loves her in an age of lost innocence. If the woman goes along with this she will have received a declaration of love all the same. Neither of the two will speak innocently, both will accept the challenge of the past, of the already said, which cannot be eliminated; both will consciously and with pleasure play the game of irony....But both will have succeed, once again in speaking of love.²⁰

Koolhaas is offering a way to once again talk of history, just as Eco tells of how to talk again of love. He asks us to enter into the Paranoid Critical Method and construct "unsuspected correspondences." He also asks us to understand and acknowledge that it is a delirium of interpretation that serves a initial delirium. Putting it in Rortian terms; Koolhaas asks us to understand and make explicit that interpretation is use which serves a specific purpose. When this is done, then the final stage of the Pragmatist's Progress is reached; (here, in my daydreamed lecture, I find myself again with Rorty's essay from) where one sees "one's previous peripeties not as stages in the ascent towards Enlightenment, but simply as the contingent results of encounters with various books which happen to fall into

one's hands." (Then I add) Just as these books have fallen into mine and this lecture has now fallen into yours.

NOTES

- ¹ Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1986), p. 164-172.
- ² Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose with Postscript to the Name of the Rose*. (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1994), p. 530.
- ³ Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1986), p. 165.
- ⁴ Rem Koolhaas, *S,M,L,XL*. (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), p. 62-63.
- ⁵ Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1986), p. 168.
- ⁶ N. Leach, ed, *Rethinking Architecture*. (New York: Rutledge, 1997).
- ⁷ Gianni Vattimo, "The End of Modernity," in *Rethinking Architecture*, N. Leach, ed. (New York: Rutledge, 1997), p. 148-159.
- ⁸ Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1986), p. 172.
- ⁹ Dr. Seuss, *The Cat in the Hat* (New York: Random House, 1957)
- ¹⁰ *ibid.* p.1-7.
- ¹¹ Umberto Eco, *Interpretation / Overinterpretation*. S. Collini ed. (Minneapolis: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
- ¹² Richart Rorty, "The Pragmatist's Progress," in *Interpretation / Overinterpretation*, S. Collini ed. (Minneapolis: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 93.
- ¹³ Richart Rorty, "The Pragmatist's Progress," in *Interpretation / Overinterpretation*, S. Collini ed. (Minneapolis: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 92.
- ¹⁴ Richart Rorty, "The Pragmatist's Progress," in *Interpretation / Overinterpretation*, S. Collini ed. (Minneapolis: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 95.
- ¹⁵ Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), p. 237.
- ¹⁶ *ibid.* p. 237.
- ¹⁷ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
- ¹⁸ *ibid.* preface, rear cover.
- ¹⁹ Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose with Postscript to the Name of the Rose* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1994).
- ²⁰ *ibid.* p.530.1992), p. 92.
- ²¹ Richart Rorty, "The Pragmatist's Progress," in *Interpretation / Overinterpretation*, S. Collini ed. (Minneapolis: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 92.