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John Shannon Hendrix



Figure 1.

The Wexner Center for the Arts on the campus of Ohio State University (Figure 1), designed by Peter Eisenman and completed in 1989, is seen as an icon of Postmodernist and Deconstructivist architecture, challenging the traditional metaphysics of architectural form, under the influence of Jacques Derrida and Deconstruction. Although the architect has been in analysis for most of his adult life, he has never professed to being influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis in his design process. Nevertheless, Lacanian themes are clearly present in the design. The white metal grid that looks like scaffolding was designed to suggest incom-

pleteness and process, and to mark the underlying grid of the building, which is twelve degrees off the grid of the campus, but is aligned with the grid of the city of Columbus. Fragments of the forms of brick turrets are inserted into the grid; they are memory traces of an armory that previously occupied the site. As in many of his projects, the architect creates a palimpsest of previous site conditions, in a process that he calls “artificial excavation,” which suggests the palimpsest of memory traces in the unconscious or preconscious that are incorporated in conscious thought. The forms of the turrets on the west side of the building are aligned with the grid of the campus, creating a fragmented body both in its alignment and in its type-forms (Figure 2).

The dialectic of the Imaginary and Symbolic in the Lacanian mirror stage is staged in the architectural composition in what Eisenman calls “decomposition.” In an architecture of decomposition, “there is no order to its views. They are atemporal; they do not add up; they are not simply the sum of a recognizable series of geometric or spatial conditions,” as Eisenman described.¹ The architecture of decomposition evokes the experience of the perception of objects prior to the insertion of the subject into language, the structures of which incorporate temporal sequences, recognizable series, and geometrical and spatial constructions. The primordial object identification is then absorbed into language, as fragments and memory traces, as the pieces of the turrets are absorbed into the steel grid, which functions as a matrix of pure signifiers, as Lacan described the Symbolic and the unconscious. The identification of the primordial object identifications with the body is a product of the Imaginary ego.

In the architecture of decomposition, Eisenman enacts the primordial condition of the perceiving subject, one which is fragmentary and disconnected, but one which is prior to ego-formation, the self-identity of the subject in the mechanisms of thought, and thus one



Figure 2

which reveals that which is other to consciousness, or conscious thought, in the subject, which is the unconscious. Such primordial perceptual experiences are also revealed in dreams. Eisenman differentiates the architecture of decomposition from classical architecture in that “while classical architecture is understood as one moves through space and through an accumulation of a number of perceptions initially ordered by an architect, the process of decomposition reveals itself in the act of passing out and around a building in a random, unconscious way, each time recording the information unconsciously in a memory that is totalizing.”

The new image of perception in the mirror stage results in the projection of the self into that which is perceived, that is, the ego, which is found in the dream image and fantasy, phantasm, or hallucination as well. As a result of that projection, the subject is also self-perceived as fragmented, or the opposite of that which is formed by the mirror stage; the self-perception of the fragmentation of the subject is the result of the insertion of the subject into the Symbolic, and the conflicts arising between the Imaginary and Symbolic. In the Symbolic, the subject sees its gestalt image as a defense against that fragmentation, and thus the differentiation between the perceiver and perceived is preserved. According to Lacan in *Écrits*, “the *mirror stage* is a drama whose internal dynamic shifts from insufficiency to anticipation—a drama that, for its subject, caught in the mirage of spatial identification, vehiculates a whole series of fantasies which range from a fragmented image of the body to what we will term an orthopedic form of its unity, and to that ultimate assumption of the armature of an alienating identity [ego], whose rigid structure will mark the subject’s entire mental development.”² The interiority of the object in perception is no longer reconcilable with the exteriority of the object, as the interiority of the subject is no longer reconcilable with the exteriority of the specular image. “Thus the rupture of the circle in which *Innenwelt* and *Umwelt* [surroundings] are united generates that inexhaustible attempt to square it in which we reap the ego,” which is the Lacanian dialectic.

According to Eisenman, where “congruent axes,” for example, “are a straightforward definition of the idea of difference; they signal the impossibility of a return to a type-form. They represent the division of an object from itself—from the former congruence of object and process. It is the ultimate negation of what in the classical and modern is a dialectical process concerning the relationship of a type-form to a physical object” (*Eisenman Inside Out*, pp. 184–5). The split between the object and the type-form in the architecture corresponds to a split between the Imaginary and the Symbolic in the subject, a dehiscence between sense experience and language which Phenomenology attempted to reconcile. The division of the object from itself is the division of the subject from itself, a subject which reinforces its identity in the Symbolic or type-form by perpetuating its identity with the other or object by which it is objectified in the Other. The dialectic of object and type-form in architecture is the dialectic of the Imaginary and Symbolic in the divided subject which cannot find its identity in the mutually perpetuating and nullifying construct of language in being, also a theme of Deconstruction.

The Wexner Center displays the organic discord in the subject, which is a sign of an “organic insufficiency in his natural reality,” as Lacan explained.³ The relation of the subject to nature is, as a result of the self-consciousness brought about by the specular identification, “altered by a certain dehiscence at the heart of the organism, a primordial discord betrayed by the signs of uneasiness and motor un-coordination of the neo-natal months.” The formation of the subject is influenced by the primordial dehiscence, and its effect is seen in the mirror stage, where, “caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of fantasies that extends from a fragmented

body image” is transformed into a “totality that I shall call orthopedic,” which assumes the role of the “armor of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject’s entire mental development.”

The memory traces or type-forms of the turrets are subjected to condensation and displacement, as in the dreamwork of Sigmund Freud, in the transformation of dream thoughts into dream images, which was also used as a compositional device in Surrealist paintings. Displacement is responsible for the fact that dream images do not correspond to conscious reason, and causes the dream to be seen as a distortion, or perversion, of reason, a deceptive façade, as in architecture. Lacan has shown that displacement is a primary mechanism of both metaphor and metonymy in language, and that it results in a figurative or poetic signification or effect in language, called *lalangue*, which goes beyond its literal function and introduces the unconscious, as in the case of metaphor, a distorted signification, and in the case of the metonym, displacement results in pure nonsense. In such a mechanism the dream can be seen as a form of tropic language whose logical sense is removed from rational discourse.

The other principal mechanism in dream formation is condensation, which involves the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the representation of two contrary ideas by the same structure, as well as the diachronic combined into the synchronic, and “collective and composite figures.” A single dream image may be the combination of several pictorial or linguistic forms which have no apparent relation to each other, as in the “rhetorical figure” described by Eisenman in the play of difference in signification, as in the *différance* of Derrida or the *signifiance* of Lacan. Condensation and displacement are the mechanisms of the compositional strategy of “scaling” in Eisenman’s architecture. Scaling involves “the formal superposition of analogous material at different scales”⁴ as in dream work, “which reveals previously hidden relationships,” those repressed relationships which are uncovered by unconscious mechanisms. The process of scaling, “like Freud’s dream work, is one of condensation and displacement: displacement of scale, condensation by superposition” (*Barefoot on White-Hot Walls*, p. 110), as



Figure 3.

The architect seeks to use the mechanisms of dream work as introduced by Freud in architectural composition, in scaling, in order to reveal relationships between architectural forms which have been repressed by the conscious discourse of classical or traditional architecture, in the same way that dream work reveals elements of the constitution of the subject which have been repressed by rational discourse, by the illusion of consciousness and the *cogito* in the constitution of the subject. Such a strategy introduces into architecture something which is not architecture, something which is other to it, as dream work introduces into conscious reason something that is other to it.

Upon entering the Wexner Center and walking down the stairs, there is a column inexplicably hanging from the ceiling (Figure 3). A similar detail appears in many of the architect’s projects as a gap or disjunction to reveal the presence of both objects of sense perception and an underlying conceptual organization of the architecture which is not present to sense perception. This was originally inspired by Chomskian linguistics, the transformational relation between surface structure or syntax and deep structure or meaning. It also suggests the gap or in-between in the differentiation of signifiers in *différance*, and the *objet a* of Lacan. As in language there is a hole

between signifiers, a gap which is the *objet a*, in perception “something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it,” as in the trace in *différance*; “that is what we call the gaze,”⁵ as described by Lacan. The Gaze is the *objet a* of vision, which reveals the Real, the unconscious, as vision can be defined as the discourse of the Other, as the unconscious. The unconscious is present as an absence in perception in vision in the same way that the unconscious is present as an absence in language in reason. The *objet a* reveals the LACK in the subject which is the cause of its desire, which is the function of the Gaze, the lacuna, to reveal.

The Saussurean relation between signifier and signified, at the base of both Deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis, is qualified as one of impossibility and permanent division, and it is the division, the bar which resists a direct relationship, which is the originary condition of signification. Signification in language, and the composition of architectural forms, always necessitates a negotiation of an impossibility. The signification which does not cross the bar between the signifier and the signified constitutes the “unmotivated sign” in language, a concept which Eisenman adopted as a strategy in architectural design. The unmotivatedness of the sign, in its relation between signifier and signified, contributes to the motivation of the signifier in the sliding of signification above the bar, as it takes place within the illusion of representation. The “philosophy of the sign,” according to Lacan, is replaced by the “science of the letter,” and “we will fail to pursue the question further as long as we cling to the illusion that the signifier answers to the function of representing the signified, or better, that the signifier has to answer for its existence in the name of any signification whatever.”⁶ The mechanism of the science of the letter for Lacan is the algorithm, which is a signifier which does not signify, a pure mathematics which disrupts the relation between signifier and signified.

The signifier is removed from the sign in language, and is divested of its traditional linguistic function. The algorithm is seen as a “hole” in signification, and is composed of purely differential logic, based on the “logic of the signifier.” “If linguistics enables us to see the signifier as the determinant of the signified, analysis reveals the truth of this relation by making the ‘holes’ in meaning the determinates of its discourse” (*Écrits, A Selection*, p. 299), according to Lacan. It is the gaps in discourse, the lacunae, the scotomata, the *méconnaissance*, which determine the relation of discourse to the subject, as traces of the bar between the signifier and the signified, between language and the subject, and which determine the relation between conscious and unconscious thought. The holes in the architecture are residues of the *signifiante* of the architectural forms, the *point de capiton* in the *glissement* of signifiers, which reveal the unconscious in conscious discourse, as the architectural composition. The architecture displays relations between the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real of Lacan.

¹ Peter Eisenman, “The Futility of Objects: Decomposition and the Process of Differentiation,” 1984, in *Eisenman Inside Out: Selected Writings 1963–1988* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 186.

² Jacques Lacan, “Le Stade du miroir,” in *Écrits* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966), p. 97, quoted in Fredric Jameson, “Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan,” in *The Ideology of Theory, Essays 1971–1986, Volume I: Situations of Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 87.

³ Jacques Lacan, “The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience,” in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1977), p. 4.

⁴ Peter Eisenman, *Barefoot on White-Hot Walls (Barfuss Auf Weiss Glühenden Mauern)*, ed. Peter Noever (Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2005), p. 108.

⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), p. 73.

⁶ Jacques Lacan, “Agency of the letter in the unconscious,” in *Écrits: A Selection*, p. 150.

Photos are by the author.