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Lincoln Cathedral: A Work of Art

John Hendrix

(**Façade**) The first line of the Introduction to Nikolaus Pevsner's *An Outline of European Architecture* reads: "A bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture." Though this is one of the most provocative lines in architectural historiography, Pevsner's reasoning is unsatisfying. According to Pevsner, Lincoln Cathedral is architecture because it incorporates other arts. Then why can't a bicycle shed? What makes a building architecture? What makes architecture a work of art? Lincoln Cathedral in fact serves as a perfect example to answer these questions because it displays as well as any building what I would propose makes a building architecture, and architecture a work of art: the structural articulation of the building expresses an idea which is not connected to the functional or structural requirements of the building. The structural articulation of Lincoln Cathedral can be seen as a physical model of basic tenets of medieval scholasticism and the natural or scientific philosophy of the Oxford School, as best represented in the writings of Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln from 1235 to 1253, when much of the cathedral was constructed.

The architecture is intended as a catechism, or an *edificium*, of the cosmological understanding of the material universe at the time, and of the philosophies of intellect and vision which defined the relationship between the material and spiritual worlds, between human intellect and divine intellect. Friedrich Schelling and George Hegel, among many, go further to say that in order for architecture to be art, the form of the building must *contradict* its structural or functional requirements, so that architecture can be freed from its material and functional restrictions in order to be art. Lincoln Cathedral does this as well: the visual forms of the structure of the building contradict the actual structure of the building. Lincoln Cathedral stands as one of the most complete works of art in the history of architecture, one of the purest forms of poetic expression in architecture.

Pevsner's criterion for a building as architecture was that the forms of the building were combined with the forms of the other arts: sculpture, painting, and stained glass, so that the building would be a representation of the aspirations of its culture. A building is architecture if it expresses an idea external to the forms of the building itself, the idea being a philosophical or epistemological structure. The forms of the Gothic cathedral are a visual catechism of the structures of scholastic thinking in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as described by Erwin Panofsky in *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*. The forms of the cathedral are a visual and structural model of the way that people thought in that period, in terms of philosophy and theology, and the organization of all forms of cultural production. The forms of the cathedral tell us how the people of the culture understood the structure of the cosmos, the relation between the human being and the world, and the relation between faith and reason. The cathedral has a metaphysical structure as well as a physical structure, and the cathedral can be called architecture if architecture is taken to be an art, expressing an idea, as separate from the material itself; in this sense, a bicycle shed would not be called architecture.

(**Nave**) According to Panofsky, it is the *manifestatio*, in the process of elucidation or clarification, which is the controlling principle of medieval scholasticism. The dominant agenda of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is the reconciliation of faith and reason, which can be found in the writings of Grosseteste and can be used to explain the excessive articulation of the architecture, in its complex intellectual structuring. Grosseteste is sometimes credited with introducing Aristotle to the West, and interweaving the natural and scientific philosophies of Aristotle with the mystical theologies of the Franciscan, Neoplatonic, and Arabic traditions. As a result Grosseteste is seen as a progenitor of the Franciscan School at Oxford, which included scholars like Roger Bacon, and the beginnings of modern scientific experimental thought, and at the same time he is seen as a progenitor of the Great Synthesis of Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, the synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy and Catholic theology.

For Thomas Aquinas, for example, the goal was not to prove articles of faith, but to elucidate and clarify them. This would be done through a series of *similitudines* in a self-sufficient system of thinking, through the *manifestatio* in literary or visual representations, for ex-

ample, the architecture, which would make reason clear to imagination and faith clear to reason in the mind and vision of the viewer. Panofsky compared the excessive articulations and subdivisions of the architecture to the articulations and subdivisions of the medieval text, the *summa* in particular, which would be divided into *partes*, then *membra*, *quaestiones* or *distinctiones*, then into *articuli*, as the architecture might be divided into arches and sub-arches, pillars into shafts, and vaults into tierceron and lierne ribs.

(**Choir**) The emphasis on the structure of the *manifestatio*, according to Panofsky, on exposition and clarification, sometimes led the scholars to introduce elements unnecessary to the argument, as geometrical forms were introduced in the architecture which were unnecessary to the structure; and it might lead to the neglect of a natural order of presentation in favor of an artificial symmetry, as described by Panofsky, which can be seen in Lincoln Cathedral, in the vaulting of Saint Hugh's Choir, for example. This mental habit of clarification, excess, and artificiality pervaded every aspect of cultural production, including the architecture.

In architecture, according to Panofsky, the determinate and impenetrable space of the Romanesque cathedral corresponded to an impervious barrier between faith and reason, where reason was drowned in faith by mysticism. The principle of transparency of Gothic architecture dissolved the barrier between faith and reason, creating an indeterminate and penetrable spatial experience. The Gothic cathedral is organized so that the overall organization can be understood from any vantage point. The uniform division and subdivision of the Gothic cathedral corresponds to the structure of scholastic writing, which entails an arrangement according to a system of homologous parts, as described by Panofsky. Rather than the variety of architectural types which make up the Romanesque cathedral, the Gothic cathedral is composed of parts which all constitute variations on one theme or type; for example, at Lincoln, the vaulting of the nave, transepts, choir and retrochoir are all variations of the same system, as are the triforia of each part. As in the scholastic treatise, the different parts of the cathedral are designed to stage a series of relationships with each other based on the visual connections created by the variations in theme. Panofsky calls this the principle of progressive divisibility, and it can be seen in the vaults, triforia, piers, shafts, window tracery, arcades

and mouldings. Every detail of the cathedral participates in the same logical system, to express the idea that the natural world can be understood by reason, by philosophy and science, as in the treatises by Grosseteste, and that scientific reasoning can be synthesized with religious faith.

(**Bishop's Eye**) The beginning of the Gothic in France corresponded with the desire of the Abbot Suger to manifest the light mysticism of Pseudo-Dionysius in the Abbey Church of St. Denis, so the light of the stained glass windows plays a fundamental role in the transparency of the logic of the Gothic cathedral, as it does at Lincoln, for example in the Bishop's Eye in the main transept. Grosseteste translated the entire corpus of Pseudo-Dionysius as Bishop of Lincoln. In the writings of Grosseteste, in particular his treatise on light, *De Luce*, light is the mediating element between body and spirit, and between reason and faith. The articulated details of the architecture, as the *manifestatio* of the principle of progressive divisibility, are the product of the diffusion and rarefaction of light into the physical world, as it transforms from *lux*, the spiritual light, to *lumen*, the corporeal light. The rose windows at Lincoln, and the multiplicity of the forms bound together in a single comprehensive system, stage the scholastic understanding of the operations of the cosmos based on the synthesis of theology and natural philosophy, the basis of Grosseteste's writings.

(**Nave vault**) The all-encompassing interrelationships of all the membrification of the Gothic cathedral constitute what Panofsky calls a postulate of mutual inferability, creating a variety of visual transitions and interpenetrations, spatial juxtapositions and overlappings, which Nikolaus Pevsner describes at length at Lincoln Cathedral. The scholastic system also delights, according to Panofsky, in defying the rule of correlation, in contradicting the very logic of the *similitudines* which constitute the *manifestatio*. In this way reason and faith coexist; reason does not prove the articles of faith, it only manifests them, in a self-contradictory and self-subsistent system. In the architecture, this can be seen in the over-membrification of the ceiling and under-membrification of the supports.

According to Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, in *The Philosophy of Art* in 1802, architecture can only be an allegory of the organic. It can never achieve an absolute identity between idea and matter, universal and particular, or inorganic and organic. The only

way that any identity can be achieved is when architecture imitates itself in its functional requirements as structure and metaphysical shelter, as does Lincoln Cathedral, and contradicts them in its form, as does Lincoln Cathedral, so that the identity of the inorganic and organic, or universal and particular, is unimpeded. Architecture is only art when as form it is released from its functional requirements, and allowed to represent spirit in the synthesis of human reason and the organic, or in scholastic terms, reason and faith. Pevsner's bicycle shed is not architecture because its form does not contradict its function in structure or shelter, as does Lincoln Cathedral.

According to Schelling, "Architecture can appear as free and beautiful art only insofar as it becomes the expression of *ideas*, an image of the universe and of the absolute,"[1] as in the cathedral. Architecture cannot be organic form, so it must represent organic form in the Idea. The symbolic is necessarily divorced from the organic as the human mind is divorced from nature, requiring faith. The symbolic is the self-realization of the artificial construction of meaning, the signification of the impossibility of meaning in language. The Great Synthesis of scholasticism, in its philosophical basis and visual forms, contains such a self-realization.

In *The Philosophy of Art* of Schelling, the allegory of the organic is expressed through the inorganic. As the imitation of the organic in the inorganic, in mathematics and geometry, architecture as art is a parody of the mechanical building arts, an imitation of the act of building in allegorical representation, as in the elevations and vaulting of the nave at Lincoln, which do not play the structural role that they appear to play. The organic form which best serves architecture, which architecture is best suited to imitate in the inorganic, according to Schelling, is the plant form, as in the ribs of the vaulting which appear as palm fronds, because the plant form is already seen only as an allegory of the organism of the animal or human body, which is the ultimate function of the architecture. The plant form is easily reducible to arithmetical and geometrical structures, symbolic structures which are translated into the inorganic forms of architecture. The plant form is the closest form in nature to the crystalline, mineral form; it is the most inorganic of organic forms. As the closest form to the inorganic, it is the closest form to the structures of reason, which is why plant

forms are easily described in mathematical and geometric terms, such as the Fibonacci Series and the Golden Ratio.

According to Schelling, proportions in architecture are primarily analogous to the proportions of the human body, and it is through the analogy of proportions to the human body that the inorganic forms of architecture can imitate the organic. Such an analogy depends, as always, on the symbolic mediation of language. The harmony of proportions exists only in the mind, as they are abstracted from the sensible world, as Grosseteste would describe, under the influence of the Arabic commentaries on the *De anima* of Aristotle, and the Neoplatonic paraphrases of Plotinus in the *Theology of Aristotle* and Proclus in the *Liber de Causis*. Harmonic proportions in architecture are only allegorical, a poetic function of language, a mannerist trope. Through the allegorical, the temporal symbolic, or the narrativization of the symbolic, the universal is intuited through the particular, or the organic is intuited through the inorganic. Through the symbolic itself, the universal and particular are undifferentiated, and the symbolic is able to represent the synthesis of the inorganic and organic.

The highest form which architecture can take as an art is in the expression of an abstract idea in reason as an image or representation of absolute identity. As Schelling says, "Architecture can appear as free and beautiful art only insofar as it becomes the expression of *ideas*, an image of the universe and of the absolute." A true image of the absolute and an immediate expression of the Idea is only possible in organic form, which can only be achieved in the plastic arts. Unlike music, the conceptual counterpart of architecture, architecture cannot free itself from the representation of form in the real; it cannot free itself from matter, and the insertion of thought as reason into matter, the ideal into the real, as geometric regularity. Architecture cannot represent the absolute in form alone; it can only represent the absolute in both form and essence simultaneously, that is, it must express an idea. The organic form in the plastic arts is an immediate representation of reason, because the organic form itself is reason perceived in the real, or matter, reason's perception of itself in the real.

The inorganic form is not an immediate representation of reason, because reason cannot perceive itself in the real in the inorganic form; the inorganic form is a product of reason, a product of the ideal, disconnected from matter. The relation between reason and architecture is

thus an indirect one, and must be mediated by the organic, seen in relation to the organic, and as such mediated by the concept or the idea. Reason perceives itself directly in the real, in nature, in absolute identity, in the organic form of the plastic arts; reason can only perceive itself indirectly in nature in the inorganic forms of architecture. Architecture thus stages the problematic relation between reason and nature, the inability of mind to perceive itself in the real, and the forms of architecture are the product of the struggle between mind and its self-perception in the real.

Architecture can only represent through the mediation of the concept, the idea, in reason. In order to exist within the realm of absolute identity, in the realm of Spirit, architecture must achieve an absolute identity with reason itself, it must in itself and without mediation be in identity with reason, as Schelling describes. An identity with reason cannot be achieved in materiality alone, in the realm of matter or the real, and in the concept of purpose associated with matter, the laws of cause and effect and necessity, as in the Principle of Sufficient Reason, as given by logic in the real. The concept cannot be found within the matter or emerge from it; it must be external and a priori to it. In order to represent absolute identity, architecture must communicate an idea which is external to its material presence. It must enact the presence of an idea, or the possibility of an idea, in the Platonic sense of an archetype, an idea which precedes its material manifestation, an idea of which its materiality is a manifestation, but which is external to its manifestation in the materiality, external to both nature and the identity of mind as perceived in nature or the real. In organic form in the plastic arts, the idea is not external to the material; the concept is infused into the material, creating a synthesis of the subjective and objective in mind, Hegelian being-in-itself and being-for-self in consciousness, and thus a synthesis of the infinite and finite.

(**Parthenon**) Architecture can only be beautiful, that is, it can only achieve a synthesis of the ideal and real, mind and matter, within the ideal, when it becomes independent of its purpose or function in its representational forms. In order to be beautiful, to be art, architecture must appear to be functional, but in fact must not be functional. Architectural forms must appear to obey the laws of cause and effect in the real, but at the same time be independent of those laws within the ideal. This is the Hegelian definition of freedom, the independence in

mind from the laws of necessity in the real, as given by self-consciousness. The Parthenon is beautiful because the colonnade, entablature and pediment appear to support the structure, but in fact do not. The lines of the Parthenon appear to be straight but are in fact curved in entasis, contradicting reason in perception.

(**Nave elevation**) Lincoln cathedral is beautiful because the arcades and responds appear to support the vaulting, but in fact do not; the vault is supported by hidden buttresses. The tiercerons and liernes appear to support the vaulting surface, but in fact do not. The vault sits below the timber roof of the building, and only serves to shore the elevations. Those elements of the building assume only the visual form of structure, and not purpose. The building communicates the discrepancy of the real and ideal, function and idea, within the ideal, within the concept which is communicated in connection to the material. In that way the building assumes an identity with reason in relationship to nature; reason perceives itself in the forms of the building, in the inorganic, and ideal, and judges the building to be beautiful, while reason perceives itself in nature, in the organic and real, and judges nature to be beautiful.

(**Santa Maria Novella**) The façades of the Palazzo Rucellai, Santa Maria Novella, and Sant'Andrea in Mantua by Leon Battista Alberti are the epitome of architectural beauty in the Renaissance because the forms which are based in structural necessity do not function in any structural way. The elevations of Sant'Andrea appear to support the coffered barrel vault but they do not; the vault is supported by hidden buttresses. Forms which appear to be structural but are not can be found in the Villa Rotunda of Andrea Palladio and the Palazzo del Tè of Giulio Romano in the Renaissance, (**Villa Savoye**) the Villa Savoye of Le Corbusier, the Seagrams Building of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and the Wexner Center of Peter Eisenman in the twentieth century. Each of these works of architecture can be considered to be a work of art.

(**Nave**) For Schelling, architecture is beautiful, that is, represents the self-identity of the ideal within the real, only when it becomes independent of need, as opposed to the other plastic arts, in which the organic form displays the identity of the real and ideal within the realm of necessity, the realm of the real. Organic form is taken as a symbol of the real, which contains within itself, the symbol, the possi-

bility of the identity of the real and ideal. Architecture can never be completely independent of the real, of necessity and cause and effect, thus in order to be beautiful it must be simultaneously becoming independent *of itself*. Architecture achieves its communicative potential when it becomes a free imitation of itself. Architecture achieves freedom in mind in the same way that mind attains freedom as Absolute Spirit, in Hegelian terms: architecture becomes conscious of itself in its being-in-itself, its essential being in the real, and it becomes alienated from itself in its doubling of itself, its self-recognition as other to itself, and through its being-for-self becomes self-conscious in its return to itself, achieving a being-in-and-for-itself, which is freedom in mind as the absolute. In such a way architecture mirrors the activity of mind in self-consciousness; it enacts the process of reason in imagination and understanding, higher forms of reason, the *nous poietikos* or *virtus intellectiva* as described by Grosseteste in the thirteenth century, in which divine intellect, *intelligentia*, participates.

According to Schelling, as soon as architecture attains through appearance both actuality and utility without intending these *as* utility and as actuality, that is, as soon as it imitates itself in its forms, it becomes free and independent art. Architecture imitating itself is as the real imitating itself in the ideal, or the laws of necessity and cause and effect imitating themselves in reason. In that way reason in imagination is able to perceive the presence of the real, that which is external to it, as in the material substrate of Aristotle, within itself, and then to transcend the self-presence of the real in self-consciousness, to attain freedom from it. It is the purpose of the architecture of Lincoln Cathedral to facilitate the process, the intellectual ascension from material intellect, *virtus cogitativa*, reason connected to matter in Grosseteste's terms, to *virtus intellectiva*, creative intellect.

(**R. Mutt**) The object associated with the concept of purpose is transformed into an object of art devoid of purpose, or independent of the concept of purpose with which it was previously associated, as in the conceptual art of Marcel Duchamp. The concept of purpose itself becomes disassociated with purpose, and the presence of the ideal within the real is revealed, the perception of the real based in the a priori presupposition of the ideal. The concept of purpose itself becomes an artistic object, an idea which displays the synthesis of ideal and real within the ideal within the framework of the discrepancy of the ideal

and the real, between thought and that which is external to it as given by thought in perception, in the doubling of mind in consciousness in being-for-self and the consequent self-alienation of mind.

(**Nave**) Architecture achieves the representation of the universal by representing that which is other to itself within its form, in the discontinuity between the objective and the subjective, while the other forms of the plastic arts are able to represent the continuity of the objective and subjective as far as it is possible in the real, in the organism, as given by reason in perception. The objective is the material intellect, *virtus cogitativa* of Grosseteste, reason and logic connected to the real, or material world; the subjective is the creative intellect, *virtus intellectiva*, in part freed from the material world and connected to divine intellect, or the active intellect of Aristotle. In medieval scholasticism and the architecture of Lincoln Cathedral, the distinction between the real and ideal, and objective and subjective, was the distinction between reason and faith, the distinction between human intellect and the unknowable divine intellect. The architecture enacts the distinction, and the self-contradictory state of consciousness and being human, and Lincoln Cathedral is thus a work of art.

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[1] Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art* (*Die Philosophie der Kunst*, 1859), trans. Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), § 107.