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The Silences of Mies

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Sven-Olov Wallenstein

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Editorial Note

The notion of the silent artist and the concomitant aesthetic imperative to leave the work of art alone, to let it speak for itself, is a powerful and popular figure of thought. It contains a whole series of loaded presuppositions about what art is and might ever become, as well as what it is not, or ought never be. The very idea of arts-based research is a severe provocation to this model of the role of the artist. Not only does it upset the finely tuned division of labor between artists and critics, but it also demands that the artist verbally engage her or his own artistic process and/or art production in a critical and analytical fashion. AKAD's ambition with this series of publications is to act from within this provocative field while its territory is being staked out, mapped and explored by different artists and critics alike.

In this essay, Sven-Olov Wallenstein closely examines the critical writings on Mies van der Rohe's architectural works in relation specifically to the trope of silence -- silence invoked as negativity, an abiding critical potential waiting patiently to be activated by the critical theorist. But what does it mean for an architecture to be silent? Has architecture in fact ever been a talkative art form? Providing a thorough historical background to these questions, and carefully tracing central critical notions back from architecture criticism to their philosophical points of origin, the essay builds a precise response to the post-critical debate. Instead of suggesting that we move beyond critical theory or leave it forever behind us (to walk happily across that line), this essay poses the question of what critical theory might offer architecture today, and, in that process, what historical tropes deserve to be called into question. We need to walk, Wallenstein suggests, on the

very line, transforming criticality from a position that is neither inside, nor outside.

In the following .AKAD publications we intend to take on this particular challenge, to explore what it means, in practice, for the architect and critic to walk the line. What writings, forms, and spaces might such a perspective produce?

KATJA GRILLNER

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SVEN-OLOV WALLENSTEIN
STOCKHOLM / RIO DE JANEIRO, MARCH 2008

The Silences of Mies

Architecture for Thinkers. An insight is needed (and that probably very soon) as to what is specially lacking in our great cities—namely, quiet, spacious, and widely extended places for reflection, places with long, lofty colonnades for bad weather, or for too sunny days, where no noise of wagons or of shouters would penetrate, and where a more refined propriety would prohibit loud praying even to the priest: buildings and situations which as a whole would express the sublimity of self-communion and seclusion from the world. The time is past when the Church possessed the monopoly of reflection, when the *vita contemplativa* had always in the first place to be the *vita religiosa*: and everything that the Church has built expresses this thought. I know not how we could content ourselves with their structures, even if they should be divested of their ecclesiastical purposes: these structures speak a far too pathetic and too biased speech, as houses of God and places of splendor for supernatural intercourse, for us godless ones to be able to think our thoughts in them. We want to have ourselves translated into stone and plant, we want to go for a walk in ourselves when we wander in these halls and gardens.

Nietzsche – *The Gay Science*, § 280.

1. Frames

The architecture of Mies van der Rohe appears to have become paradigmatic for a certain tradition of critical theory. This tradition includes not only those theorists who draw on the legacy of the Frankfurt School, but, more broadly, the tradition encompasses Heidegger’s reflections on technology and nihilism, as well as several contemporary crossovers between these theoretical orientations. Although the discussions within this tradition contain a wide variety of interpretative angles—to the point where any exhaustive overview is obviously out of the question here—there is still one fundamental feature that most of them seem to share, namely, that the trajectory of Mies’s work is supposed to have led him to the *limit* of the modern tradition, and that this limit is experienced as negation, or withdrawal, or simply silence. This limit could either appear in the form of an exhaustion of the initial promises (the later Mies as the final acceptance of the commodification of the European avant-garde in postwar corporate U.S. culture), or as the last line of resistance that upholds negativity as an ethos set against the threatening leveling of the modernist vocabulary, where the repetition of modular forms seals the fate of the first avant-garde exploration of industrial technology in the ubiquity of the glass box—both of which could come together in the ironic reversal that declares the final victory of the “interesting” Mies over the “boring” Mies as the end of an authoritarian modernity.¹

1. Both the interesting and the boring buildings in the “generic city” derive from Mies, Rem Koolhaas says: the first from the Friedrichstadt project, the second from his “boxes.” After his earlier experiments Mies opted for the boring and the repetitive, and “interest”

What such a negativity, either qua exhaustion, or resistance—if these are the appropriate terms, which is far from certain—in fact amounts to is indeed a matter of dispute. Does it reside in the way Mies attempts to find a path between the imperative of a pure technology and the siren song of aesthetics, in a “redemption” of technological objectivity through a reworked notion of autonomy that allows the work to stand apart from the bustle of the metropolis while still reflecting it and taking it up as a condition of its own possibility; or does it simply consist in the acknowledgment that all forms of dwelling and rootedness in the world belong to an irretrievable past, to a metaphysics of ground and earth that we must discard? Or should we perhaps attempt to think of this modularity and repetition in some other sense, where object and world enter into more fluid relations that recast the idea of autonomy and criticism in a new context? What is at stake here is obviously not just the interpretation of the work of a certain architect, but the very idea of what a critical theory *is*, *should* or *could be*—whether it can still be pursued by using the dialectical models inherited from the early 20th century avant-garde culture, whether we need to think dialectics differently, or abandon it in favor of another way of thinking difference and resistance, or even, more radically, move into some other domain, variously called the “post-critical,” the “projective,” the “performative,” or even the “instrumental.”²

ceased to be a motivation for his work, even if traces of it may be found as a “more or less noticeable absence.” “The generic city,” Koolhaas concludes, “proves him wrong: its more daring architects have taken up the challenge Mies abandoned, to the point where it is now hard to find a box. Ironically, this exuberant homage to the interesting Mies shows that ‘the’ Mies was wrong.” “Generic City,” in Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1994), 1260.

2. The idea of a “post-critical” turn has recently been advocated by Michael Speaks in several essays, for instance “Design Intelligence and the New Economy,” *Architectural Record*, January 2002. For the

From its very inception, the work of Mies dealt with the implications of technology for art in a historical situation that the architect himself understood in terms of the progress of spirit toward a higher unity. In this, he was part of the debate on technology and culture—“Die Streit um die Technik,” as it was baptized in a book by Friedrich Dessauer.³ This battle raged with particular force in Weimar Germany, and Mies’s proposals first acquire their full significance, including their fluctuating and sometimes contradictory quality, when seen in this context. The nature of the unity that Mies was looking for however proved to be highly problematic—finally because it, at least according to some interpretations, does away with the very *idea of nature*—and the attempt to formulate its more precise meaning, in theory as well as in practice, can be taken as the underlying motif throughout his shifting career, both in Germany and America.⁴ Already in his early work with Peter Behrens, whose architecture for the AEG in Berlin stands as one of the essential landmarks of

idea of a “projective” practice, see Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting, “Notes Around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism,” *Perspecta 33: The Yale Architectural Journal*, 2002. For a general survey of the discussion, see George Baird, “Criticality and Its Discontents,” *Harvard Design Magazine*, No. 21, Fall 2004/Winter 2005.

3. Dessauer’s book was first published in 1927 as *Philosophie der Technik. Das Problem der Realisierung*, and then republished in 1956 as *Streit um die Technik*. For his dialog with contemporary philosophers, see Klaus Teichel, “Friedrich Dessauer as Philosopher of Technology: Notes on his Dialogue with Jaspers and Heidegger,” *Research in Philosophy and Technology*, vol. 5, 1982: 269–280.
4. For a reading of Mies along these lines, see Fritz Neumeyer, “A World in Itself: Architecture and Technology,” in *The Presence of Mies*, ed. Detlef Mertins (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994). Texts from this volume will henceforth be cited as PM, followed by page number. See also Neumeyer’s lengthy introduction to his edition of the writings of Mies, *Das Kunstlose Wort. Gedanken zur Baukunst* (Berlin: Siedler, 1986); trans. by Mark Jarzombek as *The Artless World: Mies van der Rohe on the Building Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1991). Henceforth referred to in the text as KW/AW (German/English).

the dialectic between technological construction and classical form on the eve of modern architecture, Mies came to perceive his task as the creation of “die große Form,” i.e., a raising of technological structure to the level of a new monumentality, where the discovery of the steel frame also entailed a metaphysical potential that defined the outline of the architectural project of modernity. Fritz Neumeyer’s reading of this idea, which situates it as a sequel to a long debate stretching back to German Idealism, and eventually leading up to the alternative “Hegel or Nietzsche,” proposes that we finally should understand it as the quest for a certain *harmony*, or a “bound duality,” that would allow the technical in its disruptive force to co-exist with a new freedom: “Mies enacted the destruction of architecture, using the liberating forces of modern construction to free the wall from its obligation of carrying load and proudly presenting the skeleton as the constituent element of the new architectural project.” (PM 72)

In order to attain this zero-point it was however also necessary, at the initial stage, to downplay or even reject the inherited idea of a subjective artistic *will to form* in order to attain the *will of the epoch*: the contemporary era requires a “complete renunciation of one’s own aims in the work, of one’s whim, or one’s own vanity,” Mies writes in a series of notes from 1927 (KW 338/AW 278). When he famously states in a programmatic text simply entitled “Baukunst” in the magazine *G* in 1923 that “We know no forms, only

5. Which for Neumeyer translates into a difference between “construction” and “interpretation” of reality—in the Platonic-Hegelian variant, a belief in an eternal order of things and absolute values detached from time, in the Nietzschean variant, a belief in the primacy of will and a “plastic power” that creates new values—and then into the opposition between Berlage, who opts for a universal lawfulness that he finds instantiated in Gothic architecture as interpreted by Viollet-le-Duc, and Behrens, who emphasizes the demands of modern construction as a way beyond nature, leading into rhetoric and style. See KW/AW, chapter 3.



Peter Behrens, AEG Turbine Factory, 1909, Berlin.

building problems. Form is not the goal but the result of our work” (KW 300/AW 242), this may appear to radically dethrone the architect in favor of an objectivist engineering culture, and to reduce the individual to a mere bearer of some transpersonal *Zeitgeist* rooted in technological rationality. This discourse on “spirit” however shares historical complexity with many other contemporary versions of the period,⁶ and as Neumeyer shows, there is also a strong classical moment in Mies, and not only in his well-known relation to Schinkel.⁷ Some ten years later he would just as emphatically claim in a lecture at the Werkbund that technology *as such* can never decide issues of “new values” or “ultimate goals,” and that the “meaning and justifica-

6. It would far too reductive to see this spiritualism as simply a “reactionary” trait, as is for instance the case in Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). The discourse on the meaning of spirit in fact permeates the whole epoch and its various cultural diagnoses, and is equally strong in Husserl and Heidegger, and in many other writers from Spengler and Valéry to Simmel, Scheler, Sombart and Rathenau, all of whom theorize the encounter with technology as the question of the meaning of “spirit.”

7. In 1927 the critic Paul Westheim can write that Mies is the “most promising of today’s architects,” because he has revived the “specific architectonic of Schinkel,” and he can in fact be considered as “one of the most original of Schinkel’s followers.” (“Mies van der Rohe: Entwicklung eines Architekten,” in KW 110/AW 76).

tion of each epoch, even the new one, lie only in providing the conditions under which the spirit can exist" (KW 372/AW 309). In Neumeier's reading the Barcelona Pavilion of 1929 is the decisive work that sets itself the task of creating the conditions for these new spiritual values, and does this by making room for, or more precisely *constructing the space* for, subjective experience: the building is a "viewing machine," whose significance can only be discerned in an active strolling around that brings subject and object together, and where the frame no longer signals merely a technological objectivity, but itself becomes an "instrument for perception" (PM 78). More generally, Mies's "Foreword" to *Bau und Wohnung*, the publication from the Weissenhofsiedlung exhibition in 1927, marks a significant change in cautioning us against "current slogans as rationalization and typification," and in demanding that architects must "raise tasks out of an atmosphere of the unilateral and the doctrinaire." (KW 319/AW 259)

This raising of the tasks will imply a new spatial freedom that depends both on technical advances and on a reworking of classical language, as in the case of the Krefeld Houses (1928) and then more clearly in the Tugendhat House (1930), with its famous sliding window that fuses interior and exterior, all of which comes together in the Barcelona Pavilion. In his final text before leaving Germany for the U.S., Mies writes that steel and glass "permit a new freedom in spatial construction that we will no longer relinquish," and that "only now can we articulate space freely, open it up and connect it to the landscape. Now it becomes clear again what a wall is, what an opening, what is floor and what ceiling. Simplicity of construction, clarity of tectonic means, and purity of material reflect the luminosity of original beauty." (KW 378/AW 314) The tectonics and frames of Schinkel can here be rethought within a modernist vocabulary which for Neumeier brings about a new relation between man and nature.

In this perspective technology neither erases nor supersedes nature, but is supposed to fuse mind and nature within "a higher, metaphysical reality," as Neumeier says (PM 81). The spatial constructions of Mies provide a "concentration that allows the subject to step aside from the world while remaining within it, not retreating from it" (ibid)—a subtle and complex figure of resistance *and* affirmation, withdrawal *and* immersion, whose tectonic expression Neumeier locates in the *frame* ("the instrument of perception that creates isolation and connection at the same time," ibid), and to which we will have occasion to return repeatedly throughout this essay. In Neumeier's reading these steel skeletons have a decisive technological and material dimension, but they also make possible subjective experience in that they function as "viewing frames" that provide a different perspective on the cityscape; they are at once places for "stepping aside" and gaining a certain distance, as well as optical machines that provide a kind of visual immersion, especially as they appear at night in the luminosity of the Metropolis, when the building is both a translucent structure and itself a source of light. In this sense, Mies's last buildings can be understood as a termination point of a cycle of frame and light, the prime case being the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, which allows the spectator to look at the artworks while still being connected to the city from a certain distance—the distance of a redeemed subjectivity, as it were, where, in Neumeier's formulation, the "opposite worlds of transparency and gravity, of technology and architecture finally were united" (PM 83).

Neumeier's reading of the motif of a "bound duality" thus emphasizes the conciliatory dimension of Mies's architectural project, and it has the undeniable strength of being closely related to the architect's own statements and theories, whose development Neumeier has traced in great detail. A similar reading, which however locates the



Mies van der Rohe,
Tugendhat House,
1930, Brno.

decisive move to “spiritualize” technology at a later stage, can be found in an essay by Eric Bolle, who reads Mies in light of Nietzsche, Ernst Jünger, and the idea of the modern age as the deployment of the will to power.⁸ That Mies was a passionate reader of Spengler is well known, but the background in Nietzsche and Jünger also points to a more affirmative and “nihilistic” vision that for Bolle is what characterizes his earlier work.⁹ Like Spengler, Jünger understands technology as an essential dimension of reality as such, and it cannot be reduced to any particular set of tools and instruments (an interpretation that we will also encounter in Heidegger), but unlike the pessimism that prevails in a text like Spengler’s *Der Mensch und die Technik* (1931), where man’s attempt to dominate external nature

8. See Eric Bolle. “Der Architekt und der Wille zur Macht: Das Problem der Technik in den Schriften von Ernst Jünger und Mies van der Rohe,” *Weimarer Beiträge* 38 (1992): 390-406.
9. For more on Jünger and technology, see my discussion in *Essays, Lectures* (Stockholm: Axl Books, 2007), chapter 6. The influence of Nietzsche on modern architecture is by no means limited to Mies, but extends in multifarious ways from the *Jugendstil* to Corbusier and beyond. For an analysis of Nietzsche’s different uses of architectural images, see Fritz Neumeyer, *Der Klang der Steine. Nietzsches Architekturen* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 2001); for the impact of Nietzsche on modern architecture, see Alexandre Kostka and Irving Wolfarth (eds.): *Nietzsche and “An Architecture of Our Minds”* (Santa Monica: Getty Institute, 1999).



Mies van der Rohe,
Barcelona Pavillion
[destroyed],
Barcelona, 1929.
Reconstructed 1983-1986.

leads him away from his inner nature and toward his own destruction, Jünger sees in technology a force that by destroying bourgeois 19th century culture paves the way for the emergence of the new era of the “Worker,” as he explains in *Der Arbeiter* (1932) and several shorter works from the same period. Jünger’s Worker is not so much a sociological as a metaphysical category, the final *Gestalt* of a will to power that is ready to assume a planetary mastery, and for which all differences between man and machine, organic and technological, etc., will disappear in a new type of post-human “organic construction.”

Bolle’s reading of Mies’s early work emphasizes a similar affirmation of architecture as a radical domination of nature and a dissolution of the individual. The idea of what the architect in 1926, with a strikingly völkisch decisionist formula, calls the “spatial execution of spiritual decisions” (“räumlicher Vollzug geistiger Entscheidungen,” KW 311/AW 252) pervades his thinking during the 1920s. In 1928, due to the encounter with the writings of the Italian-German philosopher and theologian Romano Guardini’s work,¹⁰ Mies however begins to doubt the blessings of technology, but only in so far as the blessings are not interpreted correctly and do not include a

10. For more on Guardini’s influence, see Neumeyer, KW/AW, chapter 6.

spiritual mission. In a lecture entitled “The Preconditions of Architectural Work” from 1928 he states: “We do not need less but more technology. We see in technology the possibility of freeing ourselves, the opportunity to help the masses. We do not need less science, but a science that is more spiritual; not less, but a more mature economic energy. All of that will only become possible when man asserts himself in objective nature and relates it to himself.” (KW 365/AW 301) These early remarks notwithstanding, Bolle argues that it is in fact not until the postwar period that a decisive shift occurs, as this for instance comes across in the lecture entitled “Technology and Architecture” from 1950, or more radically still in the late interview in 1958 with Christian Norberg-Schulz. Here Mies speaks of his attempts to attain “a respectful attitude toward things,” and says that we “should attempt to bring nature, houses, and human beings together into a higher unity. If you view nature through the glass walls of the Farnsworth House, it gains a more profound significance than if viewed from outside. This way more is said about nature—it becomes part of a larger whole.” (KW 405/AW 399) The reference to the Farnsworth House (1950) is crucial for Bolle’s interpretation. In this building, he suggests, technology has become entirely spiritualized in a way that parallels the later development of Jünger’s reflections, and also the development toward a certain “sublime clarity” in Nietzsche’s final conception of the will to power: nature and man are united in a way that no longer depends upon willing, but on letting things be as they are in themselves—although such a “letting,” with its obvious Heideggerian connotations, is still dependent on technology: it is the glass walls of the country house that let nature come into its own and give it a “higher significance.”

The philosophical dimension of Mies’s architecture, Bolle suggests in a dense statement which, perhaps in a somewhat contradictory fashion, maps onto several of

the motifs that I will attempt to disentangle in what follows, is that it “by pushing all peripheral things aside creates *emptiness* and *absence*,” or a “meditative *calm*.” This assumes an aristocratic stance that does “enter into a dialog with the city, but, following a Nietzschean pathos takes up a distance from it,” at the same time that Mies *also* creates an “architecture of the will to power that subjects the Metropolitan chaos to a clear order, and as it were calls the city to order.” The “elegant absence” of Mies’s architecture, its “liberating renunciation,” radiates a “sublime contempt and indifference toward the Metropolis,” Bolle concludes, and it has been created for “nameless people whose idea of community is based on mutual silence and estrangement.”

The two above interpretations converge in the idea that Mies’s work strives to achieve a spiritual and, as it were, metaphysical unity, and that this unity resides in an autonomy of the work that in the end transfigures technology; however, in Bolle’s version this final stance also implies a strong moment of distance and division, especially in relation to the cityscape (which perhaps overstates the case of the Farnsworth House as constituting a primordial relation to nature), whereas Neumeyer optimistically emphasizes the fusion of inner and outer, city and building, and the communal character of the work.

In Bolle we also encounter a trope that runs through many of the interpretations that I will attempt to survey in the following, i.e. the appreciation of Mies’s work as *silent*—a silence understood in terms of negation, resistance, and withdrawal, but also as opening up a certain indeterminacy where critique passes over into affirmation, and where the dividing line between these two modes of thinking and acting becomes highly sinuous and labyrinthine. It is true that the *topos* of silence in architecture has many other dimensions, above all a certain sense of aristocratic aloofness and authority, as in the case of Louis Kahn for

example, which is by no means foreign to Mies's personality, and to which Bolle points in speaking of "indifference" and even "contempt."¹¹ Here I have however chosen to discuss interpretations that are based on various versions of negativity or other related concepts, since they tend to have a strategic function for the idea of a "critical theory." An essential precondition for the critical effect of such theories is however that the silence of the work must be made to *speak* in the next moment, it must produce a certain interpretative eloquence on the part of the theory that re-inserts it into the totality of which it refuses to speak, and in what follows I will attempt to examine some of these exchanges, dialogs, or perhaps even forms of ventriloquy. And as we will see, if Mies has become a surface for projection for a whole tradition of critical theory, an object in which it reflects itself as if in a source of both legitimacy and self-questioning, then this also indicates the extent to which the idea of *reflective surfaces*, of mirrors that distribute transparencies and opacities that condition both the theory and the object, belongs to this game too as one of its constitutive features.

The arguments that follow will attempt to explore the multitudinous recesses and resources of this silence, or rather these *silences*, and the kind of equally multifarious reflections that they necessarily produce—for this loss or interruption of discourse is by no means of one piece, in the same way that the glassy surfaces allow for the interpenetration of both an inside and an outside, as well as refract the spectator into a multiplicity of viewpoints.

11. For a discussion of silence in other architectural contexts, see for instance Malcolm Quantrill and Bruce Webb (eds.): *The Culture of Silence: Architecture's Fifth Dimension* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M Univ., 1998); John Lobell, *Between Silence and Light: Spirit in the Architecture of Louis I. Kahn* (Boston: Shambhala, 1985); Werner Blaser (ed.): *Tadao Ando: Architecture of Silence* (Zurich: Birkhäuser, 2001).

Mies van der Rohe,
Farnsworth House,
Plano, Illinois, 1951.



2. Words

Before entering into the various silences of Mies, we need to inquire into what this metaphor presupposes (if “metaphor” is even the right word, the issue here being not a *transferral* of sense, but its negation and withdrawal, or even *erasure*). The question, in short, is this: if architecture at a certain point refrains from speech, words, and eloquence, and understands this renunciation as its highest and most fundamental possibility, at what point did it then in fact *speak*, what did it say, and what were the conditions for its eloquence? As we will see, the silence ascribed to the architectural work in late modernity in fact reverberates with other silences and other interruptions of language, with several other contorted transactions between words and things; the fear of a loss of language in fact seems not only to co-exist with, but even to engender, a proliferation of discourses that claim to be both its diagnosis and overcoming. Few things seem to be as voluble as the discourse on silence.

If modernity ends in a certain silencing of the expressiveness of the work, it also begins with an analogous drying up or fragmentation of an earlier vocabulary of architecture.¹² This earlier paradigm was held together by an idea of mimesis and representation, and its founding structure was a theory of orders that produced a set of rules for making. This “poetics” was consistent enough to produce the unity of a tradition, and fluid enough to allow

12. This loss of language and sense is of course already the explicit theme for Pascal when he speaks of the frightening quality of the “eternal silence of the infinite spaces” opened up by Descartes; see *Pensées*, no. 201 in the Brunschvicg edition. For a detailed survey of the classical vocabulary, see Werner Szambien, *Symétrie, goût, caractère. Théorie et terminologie de l'architecture à l'âge classique 1550–1800* (Paris: Picard, 1986). For a recent discussion of the language analogy, that highlights in particular the importance of Le Camus de Mezière and the discovery of “sensations,” see Louise Pelletier, *Architecture in Words: Theatre, Language and the Sensuous Space of Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2006).

for deviations, and in this sense it can be understood as a “vocabulary” with an open and fluctuating grammar. The explicit and systematic use of the language analogy however only imposes itself in architectural theory from the beginning of the 18th century and onwards. The motivation for this analogy seems to have been the analysis of what constitutes architecture as an art form, or if we put this in the traditional terminology used to classify the arts, an examination of the sense in which it can be taken as a free and not simply a mechanical art. The first explicit use of this argument can be found in Jean-Louis de Cordemoy’s *Nouveau Traité de l’architecture* (1714), where the comparison is organized by the figures of rhetoric.¹³ It is because of this fundamental structure, Cordemoy claims, that architecture can represent moods and characters, and that it can be said to be expressive. Germain Boffrand’s *Livre d’architecture* (1745) proceeds to an explicit linking of the different literary genres and their level of style (tragedy, comedy, idyllic poetry, etc.) as they had been established from Horace’s *Art of Poetry* and onwards: “The orders of architecture used in the works of the Greeks and the Romans

13. Cordemoy’s theory is analyzed in Alain Guiheux and Dominique Rouillard, “L’architecture parlante. Une autre crise,” *Mesure pour mesure: Architecture et Philosophie*, special issue of *Cahiers du Centre de Création Industrielle*, 1987, 19 f. I have made significant use of this essay for the following; however, I find it difficult to subscribe to their overarching claim—which the authors themselves admit has features of an “apocalyptic caricature” (ibid)—that the analogy with language and the multiple borrowings from rhetoric would have led to the “destruction of architecture as a discipline” (23). This seems to overestimate the force of the language analogy as well as presuppose that architecture at one point or another would have been in full possession of itself, without any need for external theoretical support. Neither one of these hypotheses seems fruitful to me. There is in fact a wide variety of ways in which architecture can be compared to language, and the following remarks only point to some aspects; for a helpful general discussion of the language analogy, see Adrian Forty, *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 63–85.

correspond to the different types of buildings in the same way that the different poetic genres relate to the subjects to be treated.”¹⁴ The parts of architecture, he suggests, can in fact be understood as words in discourse, and this is why they are subordinated to a higher unity.

The theme is picked up by Charles Batteux, who presents the system of the fine arts in a more or less completed form (the final enumeration of the five arts appears first in d’Alembert’s *Discours préliminaire* to the *Encyclopédie* in 1751). In Batteux the language analogy is used both to lift architecture into the system of the arts and to preserve the superiority of poetry, which remains the true model for the arts. In *De la construction oratoire* (1763, written as a commentary to his translation of Dionysius of Halicarnassus’s treatise *On the Composition of Words*) Batteux first presents us with the excluding model when he objects to the ancient author’s claim that the poet, just like the architect, first chooses his raw material (building elements being the equivalent of words) and only subsequently combines them into a unity. Words cannot be understood as a passive matter, Batteux retorts, since they are the soul of poetry: the analogy with architecture leads one astray and it obscures the freedom of art. In a later comment on the same passage in Dionysius, Batteux proposes that the error lies in too quickly identifying architecture as a free art with the mechanical art of the craftsman or the mason. Architecture in this analysis acquires two values: on the one hand it blocks the understanding of the poetic principle by suggesting that its elements are just inanimate matter, on the other hand it can be brought into the sphere of poetry if it is separated from the materiality of craft and is understood as a pure conception or “plan.”¹⁵

14. Germain Boffrand, *Livre d’architecture* (Paris, 1745), 24.

15. It is the comparison with architecture, Batteux says, “that prevented Dionysius from seeing that words not only make up the body and material of discourse, just as the stones in a house, but contain

In his earlier work, *Les beaux-arts réduits à un même principe* (1746), Batteux had already established the connection between rhetoric and architecture, and located the origin of both in poetry, which in the true and proper sense is a free and fine art, whereas architecture and rhetoric are situated between the mechanical and the fine arts, since they relate to both pleasure and utility: “The third kind contains those arts whose object is both utility and pleasure: rhetoric and architecture belong here; they spring forth from need, and are perfected by taste. They occupy a kind of intermediary position between the other two arts.”¹⁶ Need is however more important than pleasure, and neither one of these intermediary arts has access to the properly productive nature of art, which is *fiction*. “Poetry lives by fiction alone,” Batteux writes, whereas architecture is built upon a “foundation of truth, which must cunningly mix with lies, so that a coherent whole of a uniform nature is formed.” The beauty and grandness that a building can achieve is always subject to the dictates of decorum, in the same way that “rhetoric always, even when it is most free, is related to the useful and the true.” Unlike poetry, music, and dance, architecture is unable to “grant us images of human actions and passions,” instead it must limit itself to “setting the stage for the play”; only in the case of the monument and the temple may it “to a certain extent elevate itself, aspire to admiration, and deploy all of

the soul, i.e. the passions of the speaker.” (*De la construction oratoire* [Paris, 1763], 183) In the later text he will rather divide architecture itself into two parts, where the material and practical part can only be understood from the point of view of theory: “He (Dionysius) sees the words like the workers see the wood, stone, and plaster that they use for constructing the house. He himself makes this comparison. But he does not push it all the way to the detailed plan of the architect, even though the use of materials necessarily depends on this plan.” (*Réflexions sur la langue française et sur Devis* [Paris, 1783], 221)

16. *Les beaux-arts réduits à un même principe* (Paris, 1746), 6. The following quotes on pp. 28, 47, and 290.

its riches, though without straying too far from its original foundation, which is need and usage.”

In the writings of Jacques-François Blondel we find the most fully elaborated analogy between the orders and the hierarchy of literary styles, but also a new concern that architecture is about to lose its expressive quality, that its capacity for speaking is drying up, and that its status in culture is being eclipsed. The pedagogical zeal with which Blondel proposes to “explain the elements of architecture and make its products accessible” is necessitated by the fact that most of its traditional patrons and spokesmen have become “ignorant even of its most basic elements and incapable of judging its products.”¹⁷ Blondel’s worries may seem like an isolated case when seen in the light of the more general wave of confidence in the language analogy, but in fact it points ahead to what would erupt at the end of the 18th century: the loss of the Vitruvian tradition, and as a consequence, the depletion of the inherited vocabulary. In this sense it would not be misleading to say that the beginnings of architectural modernity consist in the breakdown of a certain mode of language, with its lexicon, semantics, and syntax. But this breakdown should in fact be understood only as a temporary *silencing*, within which we will have to discern the multiple murmurings out of which a new vocabulary emerges. This new language will reject the vocabulary of representation and *order*, and instead move into a discourse of production and *ordering*.¹⁸

The positive project that is delineated here is to produce

17. Blondel, *Discours sur la nécessité de l'étude de l'architecture* (Paris, 1754), 47, 22.
18. This shift from representation to production, from order to ordering, can be analyzed in several ways. In another context I have attempted to grasp this in terms of what Foucault calls “biopolitics,” i.e. the emergence of a new regime of power and knowledge that takes life and the population as its object; cf. my *Biopolitics and the Emergence of Modern Architecture* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008).

the spatial order of a new society and a new living subject, which is the program of Ledoux in his *L'Architecture considérée sous le rapport de l'art, des mœurs et de la législation* (1804). While still connected to the classical hierarchy of styles in several ways, this architecture wants to attain a new generative power, in a complex rethinking of the tradition that produces a theoretical insecurity, a kind of semantic crisis. This is the crisis that Manfredo Tafuri sees already in Piranesi, and in the “silence of things” and the “empty signs” that rule over his *Carceri*; Piranesi’s universe is “place of total disorder” that already contains many of the crises to come. There are several options here: if we on the one hand can pit Piranesi’s dissolution of language and his retreat into the fragment against Ledoux’s new discourse, we must on the other hand make room for the “geometric silence” of Jacques-Nicolas-Louis Durand, where language is reorganized on the basis of the new Polytechnic education and architecture breaks away from the system of fine arts, into which it had only recently been integrated.¹⁹ The kind of mutation to which the “architecture parlante” of Ledoux as well as the new silence of Durand belongs is a highly ambiguous phenomenon where different languages *and* silences are intertwined, a prologue to modernity that can be read differently depending on the perspective that we choose to adopt.

Ledoux wants to elevate architecture to the same “productive” status that used to belong to poetry in the former system of the arts, and this is why he understands it via a comparison between poetry and literature in general. Architecture, he says, relates to the craft of building as poetry to literature (*les belles lettres*). But, perhaps inadvertently, he also disrupts the logic of this analogy. All the figures of thought that still structure Ledoux’ discourse—

19. Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, trans. Barbara Luigi La Penta (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1976), 13–19.

the hierarchy of styles, the opposition between poetry and prose, methods of composition based on ideal geometric bodies—are traditional, but the use he makes of them already defies the order of representation. The geometry of ideal bodies no longer refers to supratemporal forms, but to the analysis of sensations and perceptions; what is at stake is not some eternal and ideal paradigm, but a new technique for affecting the individual's sensory fields. When Ledoux says that architecture relates to building as poetry to *les belles lettres* in general, he has in a certain way already broken with the order that made this analogy meaningful: “poetry” is not a genre, but must be understood in the sense of the Greek *poiesis*, of *production*: architecture is the art that organizes spaces that impact on man as a sentient being, and if this is a “speaking” or “poetic” architecture, its purpose is not to create lyrical images in front of which we would be suspended in contemplation (the “disinterested delight” of which Kant speaks in the *Critique of Judgment*), but to prefigure, and to become a *project* in the sense of a projecting of that which does not yet exist, above all a body that senses and feels. “Aesthetics,” as the term was redefined by Baumgarten and later thinkers, signifies the emergence of a subject that senses, feels, and is affected by objects in relation to which it then makes judgments of taste, but it also signifies the *production* of such a subjectivity, a new “distribution of the sensible,” as Jacques Rancière says, which does not simply mean a rearrangement of entities that would pre-exist this distribution.²⁰

The disappearance of *physis* as a cosmic order, of which the architectural and other forms of artistic orders were an integral part, is an essential precondition for the appearance of this new sensorium, and for the idea of a new art

that would be able to produce it. Nature will henceforth exist as something to be *produced*, or as a raw material for *production*, all of which comes across in a new determination of technology that had been underway at least since Descartes, and which breaks with the Aristotelian understanding of *techne* as a mimetic relation to a natural order that precedes it and out of which it draws its forms in a movement leading toward a *telos*. Modern architecture, precisely as the project of a new sensorium, will inscribe itself in this transformation, and the vocabulary that it forges will increasingly draw on the sciences for its support.

It is at the other end of this trajectory, then, at the point of exhaustion or crisis of the vocabulary that emerged out of the downfall of the discourse of representation, that we would encounter the silence of Mies, as the final point of the cycle of modern technology and art, where it approaches a certain decisive demarcation line. The silencing of language would then imply that we have reached the *limit* of the modern project, a limit that, in some of its incarnations, seems to call for a renewed reflection on the past that eventually might produce a certain melancholy (the limit as an infinitely complex and sinuous line at which we have always been located); in other incarnations, for an affirmation and transgression that take the limit as a starting point, a threshold that demands to be crossed; or for a form of analysis that understands such *plural* limits as a continuing variation and modulation, without any definite beginning or end.

3. Voids

The classic exposition of the idea of a Miesian silence as a negation of and resistance to the fabric of modernity, a negation that nevertheless remains caught up in modernity's logic and can resist it only by pushing it to its limit, can be found in a brief although strategically decisive passage in the second volume of Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co's *Modern*

20. See for instance *Malaise dans l'esthétique* (Paris: Galilée, 2004), or *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. and introduction Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004).

Architecture.²¹ This passage is part of the chapter “The Activity of the Masters After World War II,” which proposes a reading of the fate of the European avant-garde, which in the case of Mies also means examining the American context.

Mies’s first major work in the U.S. was the design of the campus at Illinois Institute of Technology, and Tafuri and Dal Co here perceive an even more pronounced isolation of the architecture from its surroundings (in this case a slum area close to the center of Chicago) than in the earlier phase. For this project Mies proposed a single module that would be repeated throughout the different buildings, which would free the architect to concentrate on details (and according to at least one source it was with reference to this modular strategy, and in particular to the laboratory for mineralogical and metallurgical research, that Philip Johnson coined the famous phrase “less is more” as a catchy transformation of the German “beinahe nichts”).²² The central work on the campus is the school of architecture, Crown Hall, a pure geometric prism lifted up from the ground, and which in this caesura is akin to the Farnsworth House two years earlier, whose contact with its surroundings Tafuri and Dal Co deem to be only “metaphysical.” Such a reduction to minimalist signs can, they claim, on the one hand be taken as a reduction to *facts*, which on the other hand, however, still preserves a paradoxical dimension of *value*, although this must remain tacit. In order to describe

21. Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co, *Modern Architecture*, trans. Erich Robert Wolf (New York: Rizzoli, 1980), 2 vol. Henceforth cited as MA.
22. Adrian Forty notes that the aphorism “less is more” was first publicized by Philip Johnson in his 1947 MoMA book on Mies; see *Words and Buildings*, 249. As always in the case of famous sayings, the ultimate sources tend to disappear in a historical mist. Vittorio Savi and J. M. Montaner claim that Mies is the originator of the expression “beinahe nichts,” whereas he himself attributed “less is more” to Peter Behrens; see *Less is More: Minimalism in Architecture and Other Arts* (Barcelona: Col·legi d’Arquitectes de Catalunya y ACTAR, 1996), 12.

this double move, they cite an aphorism from Karl Krauss that once more introduces the trope of silence: “Since the facts have the floor, let anyone who has anything to say come forward and keep his mouth shut.” (MA 311) Unlike in the Barcelona Pavilion, which for Tafuri and Dal Co is an empty stage displaying only its own emptiness (“a simple stripping bare of the void”), architectural signs here take on a *body*, but they no longer signify or articulate, they no longer speak of anything but the “renunciation that makes it possible to dominate the destiny imposed by the *Zeitgeist* by interjecting it as a ‘duty’” (MA 312). Mies’s spaces are not “accessible,” they do not speak of the “freedom” that they promise, on the contrary they “assume in themselves the ineluctability of absence that the contemporary word imposes on the language of form.” (ibid) In order to impose order on chaos, architecture must dominate it intellectually and take a distance from the real, which also means that it must willingly renounce its own expressive potential. The fact-value divide produces a particularly tension-laden distance, which in this reading is just as far from the spiritual unity proposed by Neumeier as from any aristocratic pathos of distance, let alone from contempt: it is an interior distance that does not produce the fullness of self-possession, but a fundamental absence and *void*.

This act will be carried out again and even more emphatically in the Seagram Building (1954-58), which forms the core of this analysis. Commenting on the way in which the building is set back from the street in order to create a void in the urban fabric, Tafuri and Dal Co propose that here “the absoluteness of the object is total” (ibid), and that the “maximum of formal structurality is matched by the maximum absence of images.” And then, in a second step, “that language of absence is projected on an ulterior ‘void’ that mirrors the first void and causes it to resonate,” namely the small plaza with its two symmetrical fountains that separates the skyscraper from Park Avenue. The plaza

constitutes the “planimetric inversion of the significance of the skyscraper: two voids answering each other and speaking the language of the nil, of the silence which—by a paradox worthy of Kafka—assaults the noise of the metropolis.” As a “doubly absent structure,” the building stands aloof from the city while being fully exposed to it in an act of “renunciation” that transforms the void as a symbolic form into a “phantom of itself.” “Renunciation—the classical *Entsagung*—is definitive here,” Tafuri and Dal Co write. Mies’s reduction no longer opens up toward a spiritual dimension, as in the white on white painting by Malevich, instead this “absence is contradiction interjected,” i.e. the interiorization of the abstraction of social life itself in the form of autonomy.

Against this heroic silence, the authors pit the ulterior adaptations of such forms in, for instance, the Chase Manhattan Building, or the Union Carbide Building, and then in the proliferating series of corporate high-rises that were produced after the new zoning codes of 1961 came into effect. Drawing on a famous quote by Marx, they conclude by inscribing this repetition into what is perhaps an all-too familiar historical logic, where its fate is somehow *sealed*: “What is tragic in the Seagram Building is repeated as a norm in these in the form of farce.” The silence of tragedy should be respected, which means that all further eloquence will constitute a kind of betrayal, or a verbosity that only amounts to an empty repetition.²³ But at the same time, they also note how this silence makes room for the sheer profusion of noises of the Metropolis, and in a certain way also transforms this sensory chaos into an object of thought and reflection. With reference to the project for

23. Cf. *Architecture and Utopia*, 148: “Mies’ ‘silence’ seems today out of date in comparison to the ‘noise’ of the neo-avant-garde. But is there really something new in the neo-avant-garde in respect to the proposals of the historical avant-garde movements? [...] The margin of novelty is extremely narrow” (148 f).



a federal court building in Chicago, Tafuri and Dal Co suggest that the homogenous glassed expanse here becomes a mirror, and that the “almost nothing” is transformed into a “large glass,” although the depth of intricate visual and linguistic puns that gives Duchamp’s glass the quality of a labyrinth into which the gaze is called upon to enter and in which it must eventually lose itself, has here been flattened out into a reflective emptiness that throws the question back to the spectator and finally to the world itself. Like the *Merz*-pictures of Schwitters, this architecture, in “reflecting images of the urban chaos that surrounds the timeless Miesian purity,” accepts and accommodates all the junk of the world; it takes upon itself, in a gesture of an impossible redemption, all possible phenomena, it “absorbs them, restores them to themselves in a perverse multi-duplication, like a Pop Art sculpture that obliges the American metropolis to look at itself reflected.” In this movement of reflection (to which we will return several times in this essay) “architecture arrives at the ultimate limits of its own possibilities,” and, Tafuri and Dal Co conclude, “alienation, having become absolute, testifies uniquely to its own presence, separating itself from the world to declare the world’s incurable malady.” (MA 314)

If Marx’s analysis of the logic of commodities and their abstraction and his remarks on historical repetition form

Mies van der Rohe,
Crown Hall,
1950-1956,
IIT, Chicago.

the matrix of Tafuri and Dal Co's description, the essential source for the idea of silence and a "language of nil" seems to be Heidegger's understanding of the relation between nihilism and technology, as Massimo Cacciari points out in his important review essay "Eupalinos, or Architecture" (to which I will return in detail below).²⁴ In Heidegger's interpretation of the "essence of technology," the analysis of which he develops in a series of texts from the 1950s, technology is understood not as the sum of tools, or even as the general possibility of applying mathematical physics to the world through the mediation of instruments, but as a fundamental transformation (or more precisely: *the final* transformation) of the way in which all of being is given

24. Heidegger remains a strong but implicit undercurrent in the book; cf. for instance the somewhat obscure references that open and conclude the final chapter, "The Experience of the Seventies." The first reference is to the idea of "parallels that intersect in infinity," which for Heidegger has to do with the related, yet nonetheless profoundly different trajectories of thinking and poetry, *Denken* and *Dichten*, and is re-interpreted by Tafuri and Dal Co so as to apply to the "utopias of the avant-garde" and the "reformism of radical architecture or the technocratic demands of planning today" (364). Similarly, Heidegger's idea that the relation between world and thing as "intimacy" also is one of "difference" is understood in terms of the necessary "estrangement" between architecture and the contemporary world, of which Mies can be taken as having announced the founding principle (366 and 372). The second reference, on the final page, brings together the lesson taught by the exhaustion of the avant-garde and Heidegger's idea that being-towards-death as the ultimate temporal horizon of Dasein cannot be reduced to the empirical event of my own future dying, since it is this which opens temporality as such (somewhat enigmatically summarized as "death is beyond every dying," 392), and suggests that it indicates "the impossibility of writing the word *finis* at any particular point in history." (ibid) But if this reference on the one hand implies that the particular work of any architect or any historical event cannot be taken as the factual "dying" of modern architecture, and that its *empirical horizon* must remain open ("it is not possible to write a single history but only many and diverse histories," ibid), it just as much states that being-towards-the-end and a transcendental "death" yet belong to it as its very constitution.



to us.²⁵ Technology for Heidegger should be understood as a “sending of being” (*Geschick des Seins*), i.e., as the fundamentally historical way in which different worlds with all their entities and interrelations become disclosed to us. Understood from the point of view of such a “history of being,” technology can neither be rejected nor embraced, nor understood as a neutral tool. The instrumentalist interpretation, Heidegger suggests, always implies an anthropological and subjectivist metaphysics that posits man as the *master* of the sending of being. Instead we must attempt to see it as an ultimate derivation of the Greek *techne*, as a primordial form of “disclosing” (*Entbergen*). If we understand technology in this way, we can see that it too belongs to the sphere of truth as *a-letheia*, as the movement that uncovers beings and draws them out of concealment. This structure of truth and disclosure has however been fundamentally transformed within modernity, since it is no longer a receiving and allowing to come forth, as in the Greek constellation of *physis*, *techne*, and *poiesis*, but has come under the sway of a will to power that Nietzsche was the first to perceive as the dominant feature of reality. In the reign of technology this will has become a challenging, ordering, and pro-vocation (*Herausfordern*) of being and nature (both of which for Heidegger were once joined in the Greek *physis*), an entire complex of “thetic” and positional operations that Heidegger summarizes under the rubric of “Framing” (*Ge-Stell*).

One of the decisive questions that surface in Heidegger’s reflections on technology bears on the possibility of an essential change in our relation to space, to the world and our way of inhabiting it. In certain respects

25. The following is obviously only meant as a brief reminder of the basic outlines of Heidegger’s idea of technology as the end of metaphysics. For a discussion that focuses on the relation to architecture, and that informs the following remarks, see my *Essays, Lectures* (Stockholm: Axl Books, 2007), chapter 7.

Heidegger here revives some of his earlier phenomenological analyses in *Being and Time* of being-in-the-world, equipmentality, care, and being-unto-death, but the context into which they are inserted is new. This type of reflection comes across most clearly in the essay “Bauen Wohnen Denken” (first presented as a lecture in 1951),²⁶ where Heidegger begins by addressing an urgent and concrete situation, i.e., postwar homelessness and housing shortages, although he interprets it on the basis of his understanding of technology and nihilism. The purpose is however not to create an architectural aesthetic, but to direct us back to a set of more fundamental questions that are already presupposed in all aesthetic theories: *how should we understand the nature of dwelling, in what sense does building belong to dwelling, and how do they come together in a new understanding of thinking?*

Heidegger first acknowledges that not all buildings can be considered as dwellings on the typological level, and yet they are all located in the sphere of a dwelling that has to be understood in a much wider sense of being “at home” in the world, and in this sense modern technical facilities and improvements do not guarantee that a true dwelling takes place. Should building and dwelling then be seen as *means* and *end*? Proceeding along the same line as the critique of instrumentality he had proposed earlier in “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger notes that the instrumental interpretation is indeed “correct” (*richtig*), but that it does not reach the *essence* of the matter: building must itself already be informed by a more essential dwelling, which is the foundation of all structures of means and ends, just as the movement of letting-appear proved to be the hidden foundation of instrumentality.

This text, even more than the essay on technology, provides us with a whole series of examples of the pecu-

26. In *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1964), vol II, 19–36.

liar etymological strategies that permeate Heidegger's later works. But it also provides the idea of language as the "house of being," and the recurring image of "building," with a particularly concrete dimension, and articulates them with technology in a more direct way. Building and dwelling, Heidegger first suggests, are intertwined at their very origin, and the word "Bauen" leads us back to *Buan*, which means to "dwell" (*wohnen*), to remain, and to abide. Dwelling is not just one among other comportments: it originally means to be, or "I am" ("Ich bin"), thought in terms of finitude. *I am* means *I dwell* as a finite, mortal being. We are on the earth qua things that dwell: to be is to dwell as a mortal, and, conversely, as we will see, mortal beings exist in terms of something like an originary building. But "Bauen" also means to preserve and cultivate, i.e., to protect that which will come forth of itself (*physis*). To build signifies to care for and cultivate (*colere, cultura*) just as much as to construct buildings (*aedificare*), and both are implied as equiprimordial moments in dwelling. This connection however eventually becomes something that we are accustomed to, something we passively "inhabit" (it becomes something "gewohntes"), and this is one of the reasons why the unity of these senses gets lost. In the contemporary world, which is determined by framing, building is no longer experienced as the being of man, because Framing approaches us not only as a loss of connection to the earth and the ground as that upon which all edifices must rest, but also as a *withdrawal of language*, which, however, also points to the essential and primordial role of language. But if language "keeps silent," as Heidegger says, thinking does not amount to making it speak again by returning to a discourse of humanism and values: the fundamental problem of thought is that we do not pay heed to this *silence*, that we do not acknowledge the *forgetting of the forgetting*, the structure of *a-letheia* as an originary withdrawal (indicated in the *a privativum* that signals that

truth must be wrested free from oblivion, *lethe*) that is necessary for the advent of truth.²⁷ Understood in terms of such a withdrawal, as the twofold sense of *a-letheia*, technology and Framing are not simply something negative or destructive, but in depriving both man and being of their metaphysical determinations they open an "oscillating domain" into which we must enter in order to experience the possibility of the event of appropriation (*Ereignis*). Through this event, which cannot be brought about by any volitional form of thinking or acting, a new relation between man and being might become possible, which could allow for a way to inhabit the world that neither rejects nor affirms technology, but which has acquired a free relation to its *essence*.

The *loss of place*, and the way in which loss is related to a withdrawal of language, is also the starting point for Cacciari's interpretation. For Cacciari modernity does not allow for "dwelling" of the sort that Heidegger—at least as he is understood by some of his readers—wants to retrieve. In the essay "Eupaulinos, or Architecture," written in the form of a review essay of Tafuri and Dal Co's *Modern*

27. The question of language in Heidegger is obviously an abyss, and not only because of the variety of angles from which he addresses it, but also because it more and more appears as an "abyssal" dimension of thought itself in the later writings: we are always and forever "on the way to language" (*unterwegs zur Sprache*), as is the title of one of his later works, since we can never understand it as object, but only as a condition and an element of thinking in which it moves, without being able to thematize directly. Accordingly, silence will be a primordial possibility of language, from the existential analysis of signification in *Being and Time* to the later works. Heidegger will even coin a specific term, "sigetics" (from the Greek *sigein*, "to keep silent") for his art of keeping silent, and the idea recurs in the necessity for man to exist in "namelessness (*Letter on Humanism*), or in the strategy of thinking words "under erasure" in *Zur Seinsfrage*. For a discussion of this and related topics in phenomenology, see Gilvan Vogel, Hans Ruin, and Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback, *Towards A Phenomenology of Silence* (Rio de Janeiro: Sette Letras, 1996).

Architecture,²⁸ Cacciari radically denies that the lesson to be learned from Heidegger's writings on technology and dwelling would imply a return to an "authentic" world, or a nostalgia for a pre-modern unity of man and world. The task is rather to create an *authentic housing for inauthenticity*, and the role of architecture is to testify to the absence and impossibility of dwelling in the modern Metropolis. Heidegger could in this sense point directly to what is most questionable in modern architecture, since his own questioning renders "impossible or inconceivable the Values and Purposes on which this architecture nourishes itself" ("Eupaulinos" 394). Modern architecture undertakes a radical "uprooting from the place (as a place of dwelling) connected to dwelling," which is the "exact opposite of Heidegger's *Holzwege*." The architecture "'without qualities' of the Metropolis—a conscious image of fulfilled nihilism—excludes the characteristics of the place."²⁹

This should not be understood in terms of a philosophy of alienation, as for instance in Spengler's interpretation of the fate of modern architecture. Heidegger's uprootedness is, unlike its Spenglerian counterpart, not something "sterile," Cacciari suggests, rather it is *productive*, and the fact that "spirit" may no longer dwell, that the "home" or "abode" (*dimora*) is gone, leaving us only with the possibility of "lodging" (*alloggiare*), is what gives

spirit its movement and negative energy. The cycle dwelling-building-dwelling is interrupted, but the response in Heidegger that Cacciari locates is not at all nostalgic; on the contrary, Heidegger "*radicalizes* the discourse supporting any possible nostalgic attitude, lays bare its logic, pitilessly emphasizes its insurmountable distance from the actual condition." (Eupaulinos 395)

Heidegger's Fourfold, the image of man and gods, heaven and earth, joined in a mytho-poetic unity, is then for Cacciari that to which we *cannot* return. It is true that Heidegger "keeps listening for the call to dwell," but it is just as true that "no god calls," which means that his "listening is just silence" (Eupaulinos 396). The *withdrawal of language is infinite*, and there will no longer be a name for being that could overcome the nameless of originary space.³⁰ Heidegger's language, Cacciari claims, is in fact *critical* in the sense that it produces division, detachment, difference, rather than unity, inclusion, and identity. When Heidegger in several texts returns to a meditation on the bridge over the Rhine as a "thing" that makes both stream and bank into what they are, and that joins the fourfold together, he shows us the *impossibility* of such a bridge in the age of the power plant, the very *irreversibility* of our present condition. Heidegger's waiting for the call is without end, and what remains for us is to explore the *silence* in the *absence* of the call. We are indeed irrevocably Subjects, Cacciari claims, indelibly marked by the will to power and destined to master the earth, which also means that we are essentially homeless, without proper abode.

28. "Eupaulinos, or Architecture," trans. Stephen Sartarelli, in K.M. Hays (ed.): *Architecture Theory since 1968* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 1998). Henceforth cited as "Eupaulinos." Another important background to Cacciari's discussion is Dal Co's introductory essay "Dwelling and the Places of Modernity," in *Figures of Architecture and Thought: German Architectural Culture 1890-1920*, trans. S. Sartarelli (New York: Rizzoli, 1990). There he undertakes a reading of the intrusion of technology, industrial production, and mechanical seriality into the 19th century world of bourgeois interiority that draws on both Benjamin and Heidegger.
29. *Architecture and Nihilism: On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture*, trans. Stephen Sartarelli (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 199 f. Henceforth cited as AN.

30. That originary space resists language, or at least has to remain "nameless" in our present modern condition, is an explicit theme in the late text "Die Kunst und der Raum," where Heidegger discusses the space of sculpture in relation to mathematical and scientific conceptions of space. See "Die Kunst und der Raum," *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens, Gesamtausgabe* 13 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1983).

When Heidegger wants to find traces of dwelling he turns to poetry, as if the figure of the “house of being” from the *Letter on Humanism* would imply that *the home has withdrawn into the poem*—although the poem too can only speak of *absence*: “Poetry,” Cacciari says, “preserves (in the non-being of its word) that tectonic element of architecture to which the edifice, in so far as it participates in the devastation of the earth, can only allude tragicomically” (Eupaulinos 398). In this sense, there is in Heidegger an “oscillating dialectic between *Andenken* [memory of something gone] as tragic theory and *Andenken* as nostalgic vision.” Cacciari underlines that Heidegger, when he meditates on Hölderlin’s poem “Dichterisch wohnet der Mensch . . .,” in fact shows that such a poetic dwelling can *not* be our condition today. While it cannot be denied that Heidegger envisions a possible reversal in the order of things, Cacciari notes that if the “Freundlichkeit” that Hölderlin projects between man and landscape, between man and home (the “tectonic element,” understood on the basis of the Greek *tikto*, “joining” or “bringing together”) can only be represented in the *poem*, this is because the “measure” is lacking in the *world*, on *earth*. When Hölderlin asks: *Giebt es auf Erden ein Mass?*, his own answer is: *Es gibt keines*, and our life fades into the distance (“In die Ferne geht”).

At the end of the essay, Cacciari returns to architecture and cites Mies as the very paradigm of this understanding of technological modernity. Like several of the interpretations we have cited earlier, he focuses on the use of glass as a constant theme from the Berlin skyscraper projects to the Seagram Building, and understands it as an explicit *negation* of the concept of dwelling, as the enactment of a “supreme indifference” with regard to the question of rootedness and dwelling: “The language of absence here testifies to the absence of dwelling—to the consummate separation between building and dwelling [. . .]. The great glass windows are the nullity, the silence of dwelling. They negate

dwelling as they reflect the Metropolis. And reflection only is permitted to these forms.” (Eupaulinos 404)

This comment on Mies could at first blush be read as a simple paraphrase of the analysis of Tafuri and Dal Co. But we can see that what Cacciari is in fact doing is inserting what appears to be mere commentary on a series of particular buildings into a more encompassing model that takes Heidegger’s meditations on technology, building, and dwelling to be the very touchstone for a thinking encounter between art, technology, and philosophy in late modernity. In the epilogue to *Architecture and Nihilism* he distinguishes three ways in which we can relate to the advent of nihilism. The first would be the attempt to retrieve “cultural” values, as exemplified by the German Werkbund—although for Cacciari, this is a historically obsolete model that can be of little use to us today. The second would be to gather the world into a “unified symbol,” and to grasp it as one single place, which can be understood as the underlying motif in Scheerbart’s and Taut’s expressionist visions (to which I will return below), but where certain more or less totalitarian visions can also be recognized, as in Jünger’s conception of the Worker as the Gestalt that exerts a planetary domination. The third option, the one to which Cacciari subscribes, is to understand dwelling as an act of “resistance,” which he finds exemplified in the work of Adolf Loos, who for Cacciari seems to occupy the same paradigmatic place as Mies does for Tafuri and Dal Co. The nostalgia that permeates both the Werkbund and expressionism has, in Loos, been transformed into a critique that “lays bare the mortal aporia of the nihilism of the project: that if the dimension of space-time is in itself absolute, this absoluteness can only be a product of the project itself. According to this logic, the project becomes the new subject, the substance of this uprooting power.” (AN 202) Loos’s project accepts its own finite condition, but in this it also opens up another time, or rather “the multiplicity of

times that must be recognized, analyzed, and composed,” so that “no absolute may resound in this space-time” (AN 203), which implies that the *ab-solute* dimension of nihilism as the utmost gathering, the moment of eschatology of the nothingness of being as Heidegger understands it, in a certain sense here becomes something *relative* and *plural*. In Cacciari’s various re-readings of Loos, he finds a complete acceptance of the disruptions of modernity, but also the demand that this condition should be accounted for again and again, in continuous acts of displacement and transformation. In this it can paradoxically enough become the point of departure for a positive and productive nihilism, which is the other side of that which first appears as a purely “negative thought,” and that “registers the leaps, the ruptures, the innovations that occur in history, never the flow, the transition, the historic continuum.” (AN 13)

There is an obvious tension here: On the one hand there is a desire to point to the completion of nihilism as the ineluctable consequence of modernity, which has been covered over by humanist thought in its willingness to compromise or supply missing “values”; on the other hand there is a desire to show that this nihilism is a fragmentation and a recognition of the plurality and difference of language, which opposes the first tendency to gather all modes of expressions around one core, to contract all “active” and “reactive” moments into one inescapable logical progression. The “resistance” of Loos’s project lies in its affirmation of difference, of a negativity that refuses any recuperative force, and in this it comes close to the versions of resistance that we will encounter in the next section, which draw on Adorno and to some extent on Benjamin (who often is called upon to mediate between these two positions), although this proximity does not amount to a synthesis: the idea of a “negative thought” in Cacciari remains separated from the “negative dialectics” of Adorno, primarily because the former sees “dialectics” and the idea

of redemption, even understood in terms of a “ban of images,” as nostalgic, whereas the proposal of Adorno’s critical theory is to see any idea of non-dialectical resistance as simply an effect of the abstraction of late capitalism itself. The readings of Mies through Heidegger, explicit in Cacciari, implicit in Tafuri and Dal Co, both point to the *infinity* of negative thought, and to the necessity of remaining within the *void*, within *nothing*, although for Cacciari, as we saw in his interpretation of Loos, this need not imply passivity and acceptance, but can make possible another kind of project. Such a void or nothingness would from Adorno’s perspective need to be understood as determinate *social* reality, as a moment of abstraction that is forced upon the subject, and for him the infinity of negativity would appear to be a late modern version of that which Hegel had denounced as a “bad infinity,” i.e. a sublime void that in its lack of inner differentiation in fact either succumbs to the repetition of a simple and violent identity, or installs itself in the insubstantial self-reflection of an updated Hegelian “beautiful soul.” This would perhaps be something like an *antinomy of critical reason*: on the one hand, it seems impossible to be critical of the present without presupposing some form of redemption or reconciliation, no matter how indeterminate; on the other hand it just as much seems impossible to presuppose any such state of redemption without already giving in to an uncritically accepted metaphysical heritage, which in the case of Adorno would be the confidence he displays in the category of the “subject.”

We should note here that there are at least two other principal ways to read Heidegger’s meditations on the essence of technology as it relates to architecture, those proposed by Christian Norberg-Schulz and Kenneth Frampton.³¹ Heidegger can indeed provide us with the ele-

31. For a discussion of Norberg-Schulz and Frampton, see my

ments of a somewhat nostalgic view, which looks back to the lost Place and fuels our desire to “cross the threshold and regain the lost place,” as Norbert-Schulz has it.³² He may also, when read in terms of a poetics of construction, give us elements of a theory of a mediation, or a “synthetic contradiction,” of universality and singularity, which attempts to create a free relation to technology. This is what Kenneth Frampton attempts to show in his theory of architecture as an act of resistance based on “Critical Regionalism,” which for him also means the assumption of a professed “*arrière-garde*” position.³³ These more conciliatory versions, powerful and highly influential as they may be, lie outside of the scope of the present essay, and the reading of Heidegger that I have followed here is rooted in the thought of radical *difference*. Here the absence of the Home and the Place becomes our irreversible fate, but also the positive condition of thinking in a present understood in terms of a nihilism and technology, which is what produces the antinomy mentioned above, not as a simple logical flaw, but as an impasse that thought itself must encounter to the fullest extent.

The idea of nothingness and void that structures these readings is also the theme of an essay by Rebecca Comay, “Almost nothing” (PM 179-89), that gives this idea slightly different inflections. Comay begins by pointing to the difficulty of establishing any clear connections between architectural and philosophical discourse, and the danger of reducing architectural concepts to philosophical ones, and vice versa. A simplistic version of such an encoun-

ter between philosophy and architecture is all too easy to imagine: We set Mies, the emblematic architect of the Metropolis and the high-rise, filled with an enthusiasm for modern technology and a reduced elementarist language that testifies to the placelessness and timelessness of a universal and leveled civilization, whose paradigmatic artistic expression is an “International Style” attuned to the demands of Framing, against Heidegger, the philosopher of rootedness in the earth, possessed of a nostalgia for a pre-industrial culture, and a predominantly negative attitude toward modern technology and modern art. We should note here however, as indeed all the interpretations cited earlier have (in this sense Comay’s cautions seem uncalled for), that Heidegger in point of fact never fantasized about any simple return to the past, and nor did Mies perceive technology as a simple tool devoid of historical complexity; and just as Heidegger’s attempts to think through the essence of technology can open up a radical new understanding of modern art as the precise and as such wholly authentic experience of the void, so does Mies wrestle with the question of the meaning of art in a world determined by technology, and always understands art as an interpretation of technology. Comay however ends by delineating three questions that are decisive for the confrontation between Heidegger and Mies, and also more generally for the question of what critical theory could mean today, and, in addition, for any contemporary dialog between architecture and philosophy: What would it mean to think openness apart from transparency as the phantasm of universal accessibility? What does it mean to think a “clearing” apart from the *tabula rasa*? And finally, how could we understand the aphorism “less is more” outside of a compensatory logic of exchange? These questions—if we take the first as relating to the dialectic between technology as abstraction and universality, and art as the preservation of a mute and opaque dimension of experience; the second as relating to

Essays, Lectures, chapter 8. For Frampton’s interpretation of Mies in terms of his own tectonic theory, see *Studies in Tectonic Culture*, ed. John Cava (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1995), 159-209.

32. See for instance his *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980), particularly chapter 1.

33. See Frampton’s programmatic essay “Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance,” in Hal Foster (ed.): *The Anti-Aesthetic* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983).

the problem of history, memory, and forgetting; and the third as relating to the meaning of aesthetic autonomy as something both resistant to and conditioned by the world of commodities—will continue to resonate throughout this essay, as will the “antinomy” of critical reason delineated above. And if the present essay will make no claims to have solved the antinomy, then it will nevertheless aspire to bring its consequences into sharper relief, and perhaps point towards a way for this antinomic force to become something productive, if we understand it not as a dead end, but as that which *calls for* or even *forces* us to think.

4. Resistances

Can critique ground itself on the void, on nothingness, on an infinite negativity? A different idea of a “critical architecture” surfaces in the essays of K. Michael Hays, particularly in two essays that draw on Mies as the example of a critical architecture that claims for itself a “place *between* the efficient representation of preexisting cultural values and the wholly detached autonomy of an abstract formal system,” or as an “abstraction” that both refuses *and* takes part in social life.³⁴ If the readings of Tafuri, Dal Co, and Cacciari all look to Heidegger’s meditations on technology and nihilism for theoretical support, the idea of resistance developed by Hays draws primarily on the aesthetic theory and negative dialectics of Adorno. Here we find the idea of a critical mimesis that internalizes the abstraction of exchange as inner formal contradictions, and while it in this way resists the reification of language by refusing communication, it at the same time acknowledges that this autonomy is conditioned to the fullest extent by the reification that it wants to resist.

Such an in-between location of the work, Hays argues,

34. “Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Norm,” *Perspecta*, vol. 21 (1984), 14, and “Odysseus and the Oarsmen, or, Mies’ Abstraction once again,” in *PM*. Henceforth cited in the text as, respectively, *CA* and *PM*.

forces us to abandon explanations that understand architecture simply as an instrument of culture, or as an autonomous form outside of history; instead, Hays suggests, we should opt for a concept of “worldliness,” which means that architecture is an object “whose interpretation has already commenced but is never complete” (*CA* 16). Mies’s work provides Hays with a paradigmatic case of such a double location, where the work constitutes an “exact fantasy” of reality, to use Adorno’s expression.³⁵

In Hays’s interpretation, Mies’s work registers the intense changes in metropolitan life, which also means converting the abstraction of this life into form. In Mies’s 1922 skyscraper project, which was published in the second issue of the magazine *G*, Hays discerns two types of architectural propositions. The first is that of a “building surface qualified no longer by patterns of shadow on an opaque material but by the reflections of light by glass,” the second and even more radical proposition is that of a “complex unitary volume that does not permit itself to be read in terms of an internal formal logic” (*CA* 19). In the first proposition, the use of the glass curtain wall creates a varying reflection of the surrounding city in a play of light and shade that constantly create “gaps which exacerbate the disarray,” in the second, an object is produced which is “intractable to decoding by formal analysis.”

Order is both immanent in the surface—it is continuous with and dependent on the world—and like the Dada object it remains open to the uncertainties of the Metropolitan landscape. The skyscraper projects, Hays suggests, become in this sense an *event* with a temporal duration, albeit an event that does not simply merge with its context, but rather produces a certain distance from it—a

35. See K. Michael Hays, *Modernism and the Posthumanist Subject: The Architecture of Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Hilberseimer* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1992), 192.

“radically new conception of the reciprocity between the corporeality of the architectural object and the images of culture that surround it.” This may seem not to cohere with Mies’s later projects for the Stuttgart Bank and the Alexanderplatz, which appear to discard any dialog with the context, and instead opt for a repetitive identity of units. In Hays’s reading this however *intensifies* their critical potential, and it also introduces, at a strategic place, the idea of *silence*: in discarding a hierarchical organization and the idea of a center, “each glass-walled block confronts nothing but its own double,” “each infinitely repeats the other’s emptiness,” and in this they “open up a clearing of implacable silence in the chaos of the nervous Metropolis,” which is the true sense of the critical act: “It is the extreme depth of silence in this clearing—silence as an architectural form all its own—that is the architectural meaning of this project.” (CA 22). Mies’s project implies “discontinuity and difference,” Hays suggests, in reducing and silencing all other forms of discourse that could be applied to it.

The Barcelona Pavilion carries out a similar operation: instead of displaying a rarefied spatial order, an “a priori mental construct,” Hays points to its confusing and dislocating qualities. The logic of passage through the Pavilion is constantly interrupted, and what we encounter is an assemblage of different parts and disparate materials without a conceptual center. As we move through the building, materials begin to contradict their own nature (due, for instance, to inversions of transparency and opacity, of the mirroring and mirrored), our perception is constantly derailed, and just like the earlier skyscrapers, the work becomes an “event with temporal duration, whose actual existence is continually being produced.” (CA 24) The Pavilion, in Hays’s reading, takes its place alongside the real world, it is both part of its spatiotemporal flow and yet disjunctive with it—it “tears a cleft in the continuous surface of reality.” (CA 25)

In constantly returning to a similar set of themes, Mies’s work also engages the question of repetition (to which we will return in the final section of this essay), and in Hays’s interpretation this indicates how architecture can resist rather than reflect an external reality, and it shows how “authorship achieves a *resistant authority*” that stands against the “particularity of nostalgic memory.” The true task for a critical architecture would be to “maintain its distance from all that is outside architecture,” while also reflecting on the “conditions that permit the existence of that distance” and the “contingent and worldly circumstances [that] exist at the same level of surface particularity as the object itself.” (PM 27)

In the second essay, written ten years later as a conclusion to the anthology *The Presence of Mies*, Hays returns to the same problems and refocuses them in terms of *abstraction*, and here the reference to Adorno becomes explicit and crucial for his argument. This time he approaches the work via the relation between the moment of opticality—the glass curtain wall that in turn can be taken as transparent, reflective, or refractive, in constant interaction with the surrounding—and the reiterative steel structure that “mimics the anonymous repetition of the assembly line and poses mechanization as another sort of contextual determinant” (PM 236). In this double determination Hays finds a power of resistance through autonomy, where the building asserts itself as a radically intrusive object; through the iterative dimension it destroys the fetishism of experience as a private object, while it also attempts to save the purity of high art from the encroachment of mass production by setting up its outer surface as both a screen to and a reflection of the world.

This conflict can be described in Adorno’s terms as a struggle between contradictory impulses, *mimesis* and *construction*. The abstraction that Hays locates in the later American work results from the desire both to “desubjec-

tify aesthetic experience” through construction, and at the same time to allow this experience to be produced and felt via the mimetic impulse, which means that his work will “push back toward the ineffable limit condition of architectural form, to the silence, the abstraction that almost every analysis of Mies ends up declaring.” (PM 237) The silence of abstraction is then not something that the work runs up against, it is not some kind of impenetrable barrier that would hinder its development, but its own highest possibility, its maximum achievement. Language—if there shall be a language of art that maintains the authority of both mimesis and construction—must *silence itself* and allow us to understand that this silencing preserves a trace of a freedom that today can only be given in this form.

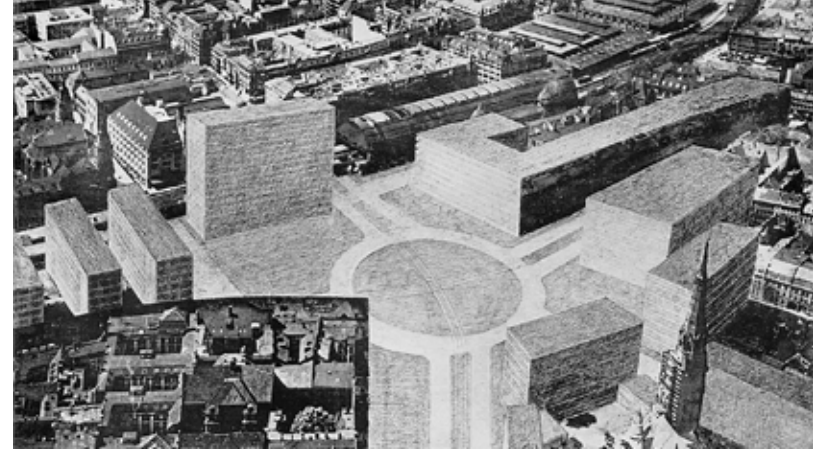
Hays then applies the reading strategy of Rosalind Krauss, which she develops in a discussion of the paintings of Agnes Martin,³⁶ to the curtain wall of the Seagram Building. The strategy consists of a number of interview steps. First, Hays focuses on the I-section steel mullion that organizes the building’s surface, and also represents (as a synecdoche) the steel construction pushed behind the glass surface. In the second step of this strategy, we move back, and the modulations of the surface, which produced the sense of “depth” in the 1922 project with its expressionist overtones, become muted in a movement of abstraction that reduces the subjective dimension. This step is a “renunciation of expression” that comes across in an “immanent evenness of surface” (PM 40). This is however still a “phenomenological” reading of the surface, based on a late-modernist dialectic of figure and ground, which must give way to the third perspective, where the building once more opens up towards the surrounding world of images and commodities, advertising bills, and commercial display techniques. Precisely through the logic of its surface

Mies van der Rohe,
Friedrichstrasse
skyscraper project,
1921. Photograph of
lost photo-collage.



36. See Krauss’s essay in PM, “The Grid, the /Cloud/, and the Detail.”

and the abstraction that internalizes the abstraction of the social system of exchange, the Seagram Building partakes in mass culture and “the ‘nothingness’ of reification itself” (PM 244). The opticality of the surface, with its oscillation of figure and ground, image and materiality, is, finally, not so much an ontological as a *social* condition. Hays points to the celebrated analysis of the siren song in Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and the tension inherent in a pleasure that signals “the temptation of that which is unrepeatable” and which must be renounced for the subject Ulysses to survive (immobile and fettered to the mast of the ship while still enjoying the song, which now becomes “art” as the object of disinterested contemplation), whereas those confined to manual labor must not hear, but have their ears plugged with wax. The dialectic between the artwork’s density and plenitude, and its abstraction and dispersion, derives from an analogous process in society itself, which the artworks reflect precisely through their “immanent problem of form,” as Adorno says. And in late modernity the abstraction of Mies’s work provides an architectural model for this idea: abstraction is both the final outcome of reification and a historically new experience, “the only possible experience adequate to everything we have lost in reification” (PM 247). The Seagram Building in this way contains three moves, whereby abstraction passes over from the social to the aesthetic and back again: first the step back in the form of the plaza, the withdrawal from social space, and the production of an architectural surface as the support for this space; then an introjection of reification in the form of the steel frame and volumetric ready-made box of the high-rise; and finally the experience of that abstraction as something that the work itself *says*, but precisely by virtue of this saying also allows us to think and understand, by refusing its status as a mere thing. The work denies us the experience that it promises, but it makes us feel the denial itself as a trace



of “everything we have lost in reification”—the Homeric siren song transformed into the silence of a tower of metal skeletons and curtain walls, slightly pulled back from the bustle of Park Avenue in downtown Manhattan.

In an essay from the same volume to which Hays’s text forms a conclusion, “Mies’s Skyscraper Project: Towards the Redemption of Technical Structure,” Detlef Mertins proposes a similar reading of Mies’s skyscraper projects as a way to think through the process of modernity as contradictory. Drawing on Jean-François Lyotard and Gianni Vattimo, Mertins attempts to locate Mies, in spite of the architect’s confidence in technological rationality, in a line of negative thought that attempts to “rewrite” modernity as the ever-unfinished task of coming to terms with a certain weakness (Vattimo), or a “passibility” (Lyotard), both of which signify a loss of confidence, and a certain modality of listening and receptivity, a capacity to hear an insecurity inside the power of technology.

Mertins points to the importance of the presentation of the skyscraper project in 1922 in Bruno Taut’s magazine *Frühlicht*, where Mies speaks of the “overpowering impression” made by the steel skeleton of skyscrapers under construction, how they reveal “bold constructive thoughts,” which are subsequently destroyed by the raising of the walls and the addition of a “meaningless and trivial jumble of

Mies van der Rohe, urban design proposal for Alexanderplatz, Berlin-Mitte, 1929. Aerial perspective view. wPhotomontage (lost) originally published in *Das Neue Berlin*, February 1929.

forms.” We must, Mies says, give up the idea of solving the new task with traditional forms, instead we should “give form to the new task out of the nature of this task,” which however entails “something more than just manifestations of our technical skill” (KW 298/AW 240). As Mertins notes, this can be read as a double stance: on the one hand an admiration of American modernity, on the other hand as the need for (European) constructive thoughts that transcend mere technical skill and that may engender entirely new forms. In this they must base themselves on a certain discourse of *Geist* as opposed to a simple materialism, with the prospect of finding a “transcendentalized substance of new artistic expression” (PM 52).

But what, then, is this “more? Mertins sees in this the possibility of architecture as a critical interpretation or a “freedom” in relation to the historical givens, which is what Mies calls “service”—architecture serves not just by being functional and economic, but also by being *artistic*, and it achieves something monumental while still being located in the world of technology and capitalism. Mies’s high-rises can be understood as “transformative projects” (PM 53), consisting of two steps that relate to each other in a chiasmic logic: the early work attempts, Mertins suggests, to naturalize and aestheticize the technical structure, while the later American work wants to show us what is natural and “elemental” within technology itself. In the skyscrapers from the ’20s Mies was in fact less interested in the tectonics of the steel frame than in substituting *glass* for *mass*, and in investigating the play of light and reflection. In this he continues the 19th century’s doubts about the capacity of the iron frame to become a true medium of expression, since it deprives the work of mass and surface, and even of “mystery” and “soulfulness,” as Karl Scheffler claimed in his influential 1908 book *Moderne Baukunst*.³⁷

37. Karl Scheffler, *Moderne Baukunst* (Leipzig: Julius Seidler, 1908), 12.

Mies’s early skyscrapers with their attempt to achieve monumentality by way of cross-breeding the frame with the crystal can be understood in terms of the search for a new monumentality that would be based on simple geometric forms of industrial architecture, like the grain silos as primary and elemental shapes with which Gropius was fascinated. Mies’s projects attempt to satisfy both demands, in folding together the desire to display an inner structural logic (frame, skeleton) with a direct and unitary outline in a kind of “hypotyposis” (PM 58) that was dependent on the transparency and reflective qualities of large sheets of thermally improved glass. These technical devices were however always to be redeemed by the surplus of artistic form—thus the idea of an “aestheticizing” of technology.

In the American projects, the sheets of glass are displaced by the new technique of the curtain wall, a diaphanous membrane where glass and steel are joined in one “dematerialized skin” (PM 59). Here, Mertins proposes, Mies shifts from a metaphorical use of natural forms to a “critical mimesis” understood as a “re-doubling, reworking, or re-presentation of that which has already been produced spontaneously by natural history” (ibid). This would be a way to think materialism and idealism together in terms of a *constellation*; here Benjamin provides the theoretical background, as opposed to Adorno with his negative dialectics, as in Hays. Mies’s idea of the American skyscrapers for Mertins constitutes such a spiritualization of technology, but, conversely, also a materialization of a spiritual condition: it follows the imperative of efficiency and utility, yet produces something more, an “expressive presence of a body” that is dependent upon a surface that veils the skeleton and as it were *transfigures* it. The curtain wall in Mies does not yield a synthesis or a harmony of art and technology, rather it is a tension between the idea as constellation and the presentation of matter (“ideas

are to objects as constellations are to stars,” as Benjamin writes) that gives rise to a “melancholic contemplation, an acceptance of a condition of being resolutely divided from nature.” Mies re-writes the condition of technology into something ornamental, Mertins concludes, which redeems technical structure “by transforming the calculus of means and ends into the evocation of an end in itself.” (PM 66) The distance between instrumental calculus and the end in itself as containing the act of mimesis is infinitesimal, and yet absolutely decisive; the “re-writing” of modernity hinges upon the possibility of locating it in, to use Heidegger’s phrase, the *un-said* in that which is said, or perhaps conversely, to see it as the *hidden word* inside the building’s “implacable silence” that theory must discern.

Unlike Tafuri, Dal Co, and Cacciari, these two readings understand the resistance of Mies as a determinate negation produced by an insistence on the autonomy of the work (which is how I understand the “end in itself” evoked by Mertins), at the same time as this autonomy is thoroughly conditioned by the abstraction of commodity exchange (Hays), or by the simple fact of always being a “more” added to a technical structure (Mertins) that always has the *first*, if not the *last* word. In this sense, the famous “less is more” does not just imply a desire to achieve aesthetic effects by understatement, but points to the possibility of an *immanent critical movement*, a resistance that *at first* need not refer to any external authority that would be the purveyor of its truth, although this reference cannot be deferred *infinitely*: it is only by renouncing communication to the fullest extent that language can resist its own reification, while at the same time this resistance can only take place by way of a mimetic proximity to reification that will eventually render the two moments indistinguishable outside of a critical theory whose justification is precisely to locate the infinitesimal difference or deviation. Thus there will always be a need for a transcendent interpreta-

tion that breaks the spell of immanence, that supplements the words or expressive qualities that the work had to deny itself, and that imports a moment of reflection that the opacity of the work must deny itself—a *reflection* and a mirroring that is also a moment of *transparency*, even if it can never be claimed by the work itself.

5. Transparencies

In almost all interpretations of Mies we find the theme of reflection, the idea of the glass surface as both a form of transparency and an instrument that produces opacity, either by fusing interior and exterior or inversely by rendering this passage impossibly difficult by multiplying reflections. In the opposition between on the one hand frame and structure, and on the other, surface and skin, which Mies brings together in the complex figure of a “skin and bone architecture,” the surface itself seems to acquire a double value. Such a conflicted reading in fact belongs to the founding games of modernist architecture, and Mies inserts himself in a particularly complex way into this line of thought, which is undoubtedly also why his surfaces have produced such divergent readings. The question posed by Rebecca Comay, what it would mean to think openness apart from transparency as a “phantasm of universal accessibility,” has already been answered innumerable times, in ways that emphatically reject the idea that transparency is equivalent to accessibility. One could write a history of modern architecture from the standpoint of how this phantasm has been negotiated, and the following short remarks, which will constitute a historical detour before returning us back to Mies, can be taken as a series of sketches toward such a “brief history of glass.”

One of the major sources for the idea of transparency and glass that was introduced into expressionism was in fact a novelist and poet, Paul Scheerbarth, who was perfectly aware not only of immediate predecessors to the notion of transparency and glass, like Paxton’s Crystal

Palace, but also of an extremely far-reaching genealogy extending back to Renaissance treatises like Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, Gothic cathedrals, as well as to earlier traditions in Islamic and Christian mysticism, and even all the way back to the various descriptions of the Temple of Solomon and the Apocalypse of St. John.³⁸ Through German Romanticism, above all Novalis and Tieck, this notion of transparency and glass exerted an influence on the Jugend movement, and when the young Peter Behrens creates his theatrical performance "Das Zeichen" for the Darmstadt Jugend exhibition in 1901, the crystal form represents the transformation of everyday life to something at a higher spiritual level, as well as a protest against the machine civilization in the form of the total work of art that aspired to suffuse all the details of everyday life in the artist colony in Darmstadt. This "sign" was replete with Romantic and even mystical notions, but it also pointed ahead to a new task for art in an industrial culture, and Behrens would be one of the first to take this audacious step.³⁹

Scheerbart's visions came together in his final work *Glasarchitektur* (1914). The book aspired to bring about a moral change of man, it was a full-fledged program for a new style of civilization, but also a poetic sketch that did not lend itself to any unambiguous and programmatic readings—the 111 short fragments form a kind of "smooth writing," as one commentator says, "as if the text itself would be made of glass."⁴⁰ Scheerbart imagines how glass

architecture would evolve from a singular building until it covered the whole face of the earth, providing a complete enlightenment, an infinite luminosity. This transparency has nothing to do with panopticism, it is not a diagram or an abstract machine of power relations as later theorized by Foucault and Deleuze, instead Scheerbart underlines that his visions are practical solutions to problems of comfort, and he stresses the sensuous and voluptuous aspects of glass—what attracts him is not transparency as such, even less any kind of austerity, and least of all a universal accessibility, and on this point he seems to have been fatally misread by many in the avant-garde. Glass for him implies the possibility of modulating light and shade, heat and cold, and of achieving a state of maximum well-being and luxury where interior and exterior blend together in a delightful continuity, and our homes become "cathedrals" for the fulfillment of all our desires. We have to get rid of our nostalgia for the heavenly paradise, Scheerbart says, so that we may realize it here and now in terms of a hedonist culture based on luminosity. His prospect is to create a space for desire, a transparent space and a transparent desire, not because the inhabitant would be subjected to (and subjectivized by) the inspection of a ubiquitous panoptic gaze, but because the phenomenological malleability of glass allows for an infinite chiaroscuro, a fusion of the organic and the technological that provides space for the emergence of subjective fantasy. His motto could indeed have been Matisse's: *Luxe, calme et volupté*.

Here lie the roots of the expressionist architectural

to the French translation of Scheerbart, *L'architecture de verre* (Paris: Circé, 1995), 8. Payot points out that Scheerbart's vision of a renewal of mankind's ethos through an aesthetic program also can be seen as an heir to the systems of German Idealism, above all to the visions of the so-called "Älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus" of a culture that makes ideas of reason sensible and aesthetic.

38. For a historical account of the motif of glass and transparency, see Rosemarie Haag Bletter, "The Interpretation of the Glass Dream: Expressionist Architecture and the History of the Crystal Metaphor," in Todd Gannon (ed.): *The Light Construction Reader* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2002).
39. On the early activities of Behrens, see Stanford Anderson, *Peter Behrens and a New Architecture for the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2002); on "Das Zeichen," see 29 ff.
40. Daniel Payot, "La sobriété 'barbare' de Paul Scheerbart," preface

fantasies that would emerge around Bruno Taut and the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* after the November revolution in 1918, and of their use of soft, pliant, and seemingly amorphous structures as a countermove to the Taylorized assembly line-like visions of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*—a conflict in relation to which Mies’s skyscraper project would, as we have seen, attempt to stake out a different path by fusing these conflicting sources into a new dialectical unity. Taut dedicates his Glass House at the Werkbund exhibition in Cologne 1914 to Scheerbart, whose *Gläserne Architektur* in turn is dedicated to Taut. Contemporary visitors described the house as a mystical labyrinth where they were led from level to level, from dark to light and back again as if in a rite of initiation. The lines from Scheerbart’s book that were displayed on the outside wall emphasize the cosmological and alchemical dimension of the work: “Light seeks to penetrate the entire cosmos / And is alive in crystal.” These visionary ideas were then developed by Taut in the secretive group “The Crystal Chain” (*Die gläserne Kette*) and in the review *Frühlicht*, where utopian visions of urban renewal were combined with ideas of a return to pre-modern *Gemeinschaft* (and where Mies, as we noted earlier, published his first skyscraper project in 1922).⁴¹ For Taut, who during the war had to retreat to pure theoretical speculations, this new synthesis of architecture and nature was expressed in publications like *Alpine Architecture* (1918) and *The Dissolution of Cities* (1919), where an architecture consisting almost entirely of dematerialized structures of

light and reflection was placed among the mountains, as if to underscore both his utopian aspiration as well as an estrangement from everyday life that in fact is more reminiscent of a Nietzschean pathos of distance than what is found in Mies.

A much more technological understanding of the idea of transparency comes across in other parts of the avant-garde, for instance Sigfried Giedion and Walter Benjamin. In Giedion’s programmatic manifesto *Building in France*,⁴² he locates a “constructive subconscious” that has secretly guided the 19th century through its confused dialectics of styles, and that now can become *rational construction* and attain the state of a transparent discourse, where opposites come to form a new fluid whole. In this unity, things enter into a state of mutual “interpenetration,” a *Durchdringung* that dissolves them in their individuality and creates one single, intense, and malleable space with only temporary and osmotic borders between subjects and objects. Giedion sees examples of this in modern engineering, the Eiffel Tower or the Pont Transbordeur in the harbor of Marseille, but most importantly in Le Corbusier’s architecture. “Interpenetration” here in fact means several things, and only some of them are strictly architectonic: spatial volumes that penetrate each other, levels that are brought to intersect by the partial removal of floors, a new type of floating relation between interior and exterior, buildings composed of several volumes that are not clearly delimited—traits for which Gropius’s Bauhaus building in Dessau seems to have been the paradigm. But there are also more general implications for the social domain as a whole: a dissolution of boundaries and hierarchies from the individual building to the city space, and then extending to all forms of social divisions between labor and

41. The letters exchanged between the members of the Crystal Chain (whose members included Bruno and his brother Max Taut, Herman Finsterlin, and Hans Scharoun) are translated and commented in Iain Boyd Whyte, *The Crystal Chain Letters* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1985); for a survey of Taut’s further career, see Boyd Whyte, *Bruno Taut and the Architecture of Activism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); for detailed discussions of the Glass House, see Angelika Thiekötter (ed.): *Kristallisationen. Splitterungen. Bruntos Tauts Glashaus* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1993).

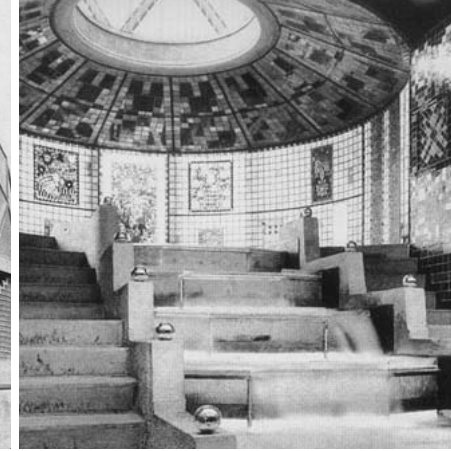
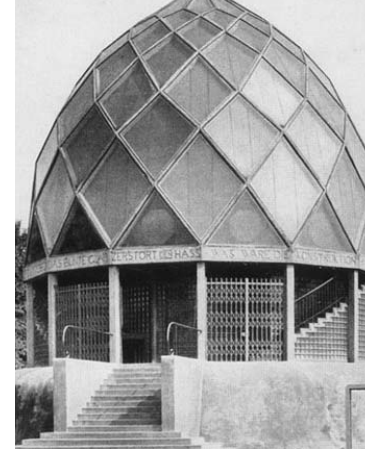
42. *Building in France, Building in Iron, Building in Ferroconcrete*, trans. J. Duncan Berry (Santa Monica: Getty Center, 1995).

classes; a common task begins to appear, Giedion says, as if several rhythms had begun to resonate with each other and a collective spirit appears that renders an emerging collective transparent to itself.

One of Giedion's first and most enthusiastic readers was Walter Benjamin, for whom the social and political implications of the modern architectonic constructions was the most important aspect. For Benjamin too it was not the organic and expressive associations of transparency that were attractive,⁴³ but rather a hard and ascetic quality, a visual and sensory "poverty," as he would call it in the essay "Erfahrung und Armut" (1933),⁴⁴ and for which he also finds support in a rather reductive reading of the architecture of Corbusier and Oud. Benjamin's major reference is however Scheerbart, whom he interprets in terms of a mystique of purity, a severe strictness and poverty enforced upon us by modern life. For Benjamin, such a voluntary poverty and renunciation is necessary for the new world to emerge, precisely because it reduces the space of bourgeois interiority and its psychological depth. The beings (for they are not humans in the humanist sense of the word) that populate Scheerbart's creations, Benjamin claims, speak "a wholly new language. And what is decisive in them is the drive towards the willfully constructive, namely as an opposition to the organic. This is what is unmistakable about Scheerbart's humans, or rather people (*Leuten*): for they reject the similarity to humans, which is a founding principle of humanism" (GS II/1 216). Here, Benjamin suggests, the organic synthesis gives way to the

43. For an analysis of Benjamin's use of Giedion, see Detlef Mertins, "Walter Benjamin's Tectonic Unconscious," *Any* 14, and "The Enticing and Threatening Face of Prehistory: Walter Benjamin and the Utopia of Glass," *Assemblage* 29, 1996.

44. *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), II/1, 213-19. In the following paragraphs, the collected works will be cited as GS, followed by volume and page number.



Bruno Taut,
Glass House
(destroyed), 1914,
Cologne.

rationalism of the engineer that releases us from a false culture, and makes possible an existence beyond the subjectivism and emotional depth of the bourgeois interior, a life that can be lead without "leaving traces": "This was something to which Scheerbart with glass and Bauhaus with steel had opened a path: they created rooms where it is difficult to leave traces." (GS II/1 217) The "traces" that bourgeois life secretes severs us from the collective, they become reified markers of a sealed-off individuality, whereas for Benjamin the true task is to forge a mode of life that opens us up to the communal, all of which in its first steps must imply a certain "destruction."

To this false interiority of traces, Benjamin opposes the Brechtian *erasure* ("Verwisch die Spuren!"),⁴⁵ a dwelling that does not abide, but cherishes a temporary "housing" (*Hausen*). This is even a kind of "destructive living (*zerstörende Wohnen*), a living that certainly does not let any habits (*Gewohnheiten*) arise, because it continually clears away the things and their supports" (GS 435F VI). "Things made of glass have no 'aura,'" Benjamin suggests, and "generally speaking, glass is the enemy of the secret. It is also

45. To "erase the traces" is also the theme for Benjamin's commentary to a poem by Brecht, from the latter's *Lesebuch für Stadtbewohner*, cf. *Versuche über Brecht*, GS, II/2.

the enemy of possessions.” (GS II/1 217) To erase the false traces becomes a way to prepare for a new dwelling that is attuned to technology, and enables a different sensory and bodily relation to the world. Experience (*Erfahrung*), defined as a dialectical unity of past and present, a constantly self-enriching historical consciousness, has been lost in the wake of the war, Benjamin claims, but in its place we find a new type of “Erlebnis” of poverty and stark simplicity, a sense of a loss of tradition that is not only, and not even primarily, negative, but even “cathartic,” as he will say two years later in the essay on the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. Such a poverty, he proceeds, might indeed appear as a kind of barbarism, but only as long as we measure it by the standards of the past—instead we should see it as a tabula rasa, the promising birthplace of a new subjectivity that no longer depends on organic totalities, and that is capable of “experiencing” (*erleben*) the wasteland as a positive condition, just as the emerging non-auratic forms of art must be understood outside of the traditional aesthetic modes of production and reception organized around the classical fine arts, if their historical potential is to be used for revolutionary purposes.

For Benjamin the dialectic of nature and technology finally produces a technological *nature*, an alliance between *physis* and *techne* that we must affirm if the opportunity to become truly modern is not to be lost. In a note in the *Passagen-Werk* he writes: “One could formulate the problem of the new art in the following way: when and how will the worlds of mechanical forms, in cinema, in the construction of machines, in the new physics, etc., appear without our help and overwhelm us, *make us conscious of what is natural in them?*”⁴⁶

46. *Das Passagen-Werk*, GS v, 500 (my emphasis). Detlef Mertins cites this passage as an explanation of his claim that Mies’s later work constitutes a critical mimesis (PM 63). In my reading, this fragment rather testifies to Benjamin’s techno-political utopia and his ten-

If the early avant-garde oscillates between the expressionist interpretation of glass that emphasizes its subjective and sensuous quality, and the objectivist-*sachlich* counterpart that focuses on reduction and even austerity, then we can locate a second decisive step in the history of glass and transparency in the post-war reinterpretation of these concepts within a formalist paradigm. It is surely no coincidence that this re-interpretation occurs at approximately the same time as the shift from “tragedy” to “farce” in Tafuri and Dal Co’s diagnosis, i.e., the moment when modernism supposedly collapsed into a corporate international style. The *locus classicus* of this rereading is Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky’s essay from 1964, “Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal.” Here, the attempt is once more made to spiritualize technology, and to do so by defending the autonomy of architecture as *art* against the attacks mounted by the historical avant-garde, but also, and more implicitly, the transformation of autonomy into the world of the commodity. In order to perform this double task, Rowe and Slutzky weld together the themes of transparency, interpenetration, and space-time in a formalist conception of architecture and art as aspiring toward a “lucid complexity,”⁴⁷ which makes it possible to think the trajectory of modern architecture as a way to an autonomy, self-referentiality, and aloofness from the world which preserves the depth and values of a humanist culture, and where the analogy with *painting* will be essential.

Literal transparency, they claim, should be seen as a material condition of being pervious to light and air, which is what also leads to the moral interpretation as an

gency to locate social transformations directly in the change of technology, which was what led to the famous debate with Adorno over the Reproduction essay.

47. Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky, “Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal, Part I.” First printed in *Perspecta* 8 (1964); here cited from the reprint in *The Light Construction Reader*. Henceforth cited as TLP.

absence of guile and dissimulation. Drawing on György Kepes' *Language of Vision* (1944), they then oppose literal to "phenomenal" transparency, which is defined by Kepes in the following way: "If one sees two or more figures overlapping one another, and each of them claims for itself the common overlapped part, then one is confronted with a contradiction of spatial dimensions. To resolve this contradiction one must assume the presence of a new optical quality. The figures are endowed with transparency; that is, they are able to interpenetrate without an optical destruction of each other."⁴⁸ This is however not just an optical condition, but also signifies a broader spatial order that allows for a simultaneous perception of different spatial locations. In phenomenal transparency space not only recedes, but fluctuates in a continuous activity, a dynamic where figure and ground pass over into each other and give rise to a meaning that is equivocal.

On the basis of a series of analyses of paintings, one that begins with Cézanne and then moves through a series of juxtapositions—Picasso and Braque, Delaunay and Gris, Moholy-Nahy and Léger—Rowe and Slutzky establish a set of oppositions that all turn on the distinction between a real and literal transparency understood as a *trompe-l'oeil* with a real object in deep space, and a phenomenal transparency with frontally aligned objects in a shallow space. The architectural translation of this opposition then pits Gropius's Bauhaus building in Dessau against Corbusier's Villa Garches. In many ways the Villa Garches is indeed similar to the Bauhaus building, with its cantilevered wall slabs, recessed ground floor, and an uninterrupted movement of glazing carried around the corner, but it also offers the paradigmatic version of a "lucid complexity," whereas Gropius's Bauhaus only provides a literal transparency, an

unambiguous surface giving us an equally unambiguous space. If Gropius stresses translucency, Corbusier uses the planar qualities of glass; if Gropius's surface seems to be suspended and to hang freely, the Villa Garches displays a complex tension in the surface itself. At Garches there is a play with illusion, at the Bauhaus no illusion is possible and the simply real, literal, and worldly dimension prevails. In this sense, Rowe and Slutzky claim, the use of glass in Corbusier does not at all refer to transparency as seeing-through, but to a structure of spatial *implications*. The recession of the ground floor becomes a *statement* of depth taken up by the glazed doors in the side walls; Corbusier *proposes the idea* that there is a narrow slot of space behind his glazing, and then he *implies* the further idea that behind it lies a plane of which the ground floor is a part. Even if this "plane may be dismissed as very obviously a conceptual convenience rather than physical fact" (as it indeed may be: no such plane exists in the actual building), its "obtrusive presence is undeniable." (TLP 97) This is an "imaginary (though scarcely less real) plane" that lies behind, and this type of operation make us aware of "primary concepts" (ibid) which interpenetrate without destroying each other. Each of these parallel planes is incomplete and fragmentary, yet it is the reference to them that organizes the façade: the interior space is understood as a vertical layer-like stratification, a succession of laterally extended spaces one behind the other, i.e. as a projection of the ambiguities of the façade.

Here we can see how the reading of the building as a painting allows for the exchange between the imaginary and the real—even to the extent that the imaginary, in a vertiginous inversion, can be taken to be "scarcely less real" than the real itself. In this movement an imaginary (phenomenal) double of the object is constituted that displaces its actual counterpart in a continuous dialectic between fact and implication, the reality of deep space

48. György Kepes, *Vision in Motion* (Chicago: Paul Theobald and Company, 1944), 77.

and the inference of a shallow space, and provides it with an interpretative depth where reading can follow upon reading—which of course only occurs as long as we insist on seeing the building as a *painting* and stand immobile in front of it in the position of an ideal spectator.

These ambivalences do not occur in the aesthetics of material proposed in the Bauhaus building, Rowe and Slutzky claim; Gropius is closer to the Russian Constructivists and “unwilling to accept certain more Parisian conclusions” (TLP 98), i.e. the project to activate the *picture plane* as an autonomous entity. The Bauhaus offers no spatial stratification, it eschews Cubist “frontality,” and opts for the diagonal view, which comes across in many of the photographs of the building. Gropius has “exteriorized the movements of his opposed spaces,” which for Rowe and Slutzky also means that he has “allowed them to float into infinity,” and has “prohibited the possibilities of potential ambiguity” (TLP 99). In this, the spectator is assumed to be “denied” all the pleasures of phenomenal transparency—but the question inevitably arises: on what grounds this can be described as a *lack* in Gropius? Even though Rowe and Slutzky explicitly deny that what they propose is a hierarchy of aesthetic values, they constantly describe literal transparency as lacking or failing to achieve the qualities of its phenomenal counterpart.

What the essay in fact proposes, as Detlef Mertins suggests in a careful analysis of its argument,⁴⁹ is that the painterly analogy saves the work from becoming a part of the real world (and in this, Mertins notes, Rowe and Slutzky perform an operation similar to the one that Michael Fried will undertake a few years later with respect to late modernist and/or minimalist painting and sculpture in his “Art and Objecthood,” where a similar distinc-

tion between literal everyday space and a kind of “opticality” is at stake). In this respect the reference to Kepes is also somewhat misleading—Kepes in fact draws on both Giedion and Constructivism, and the new language of vision that he proposes should also deal with advertising and with the new surface qualities in a modern image culture of photography and film, which are at once more archaic *and* modern than perspectival space. For Kepes, perspective freezes vision, and the task is to set it in motion, which also means involving the body in a living, flowing space, just as Giedion proposed in his concept of the “interpenetration” of subject and object in real space. In this respect, the formalist reinterpretation of transparency appears as an attempt to preserve a Cartesian subject for which real, material space becomes an imaginary construct, and the vision in motion that it projects is that of a fundamentally immobile subject.

To which of these interpretations, then, does Mies belong? Is there a trajectory that would lead him from the utopian ideas of the early work, still tinted by the expressionist fantasies, to the abstraction of the later work with its autonomous and refractory surfaces? Or does he in fact, step by step, achieve a fusion of light and structure, for which works like the Farnsworth House and the Neue Nationalgalerie would be paradigmatic? Does he struggle to preserve the autonomy of the architectural object by the creation of a body both veiled and produced by the diaphanous surface of the curtain wall, or to dissolve it in a new conception that obliterates the boundary between technology and nature? Or is his position in this story even more complex, his path even more contorted and contradictory?

As we saw earlier, Neumeyer pointed to the Barcelona Pavilion as a key work in this development toward spatial freedom, in its capacity to function like a viewing machine that brings together subject and object in a “higher, meta-physical reality.” Similarly, Michael Hays pointed to the

49. See Detlef Mertins, “Transparency: Autonomy and Relativity,” *The Light Construction Reader*.

immersive qualities of the building, although for him they rather produced a fundamental dislocation and a fragmentation of experience reminiscent of the Kantian mathematical sublime, a temporal duration that blocked the synthesis of the object and opened up a cleft in the continuous surface of reality.

More radically still, in a way that picks up themes from the interpretation of Mies proposed by Tafuri and Dal Co, but also echoes some of Benjamin's remarks on the austerity of glass, José Quetglas has suggested a reading of the Pavilion that highlights its radically inhospitable and forbidding qualities. In the essay "Loss of Synthesis: Mies's Pavilion," and then in a book-length study entitled *Fear of Glass*,⁵⁰ Quetglas rejects the idea that what is at stake in the Pavilion would be an idea of openness, as is normally assumed: "Mies' Pavilion is a closed space," he states emphatically (Loss 385). This closure he locates on several levels: first there is the base that "hides, to whoever approaches the Pavilion from the front, the way to climb up to it" (Loss 386); then the placing of the building as a "solitary object" at the outskirts of the exhibition area; then the layout and enveloping of the building that transform it into a closed interior. For Quetglas this is a pervasive theme in all of Mies's work, an "obsessive volition to build a segregated and enclosed space where every inhabitant will be excluded" (ibid), and he finds the same elevation from the surroundings in the earlier glass skyscraper projects, which, according to this reading, sternly reject any dialog with their surrounding. The later work in the U.S.—Quetglas explicitly cites the Farnsworth House

50. "Loss of Synthesis: Mies' Pavilion" (1980), trans. Luis E. Carranza, in Hays, *Architecture Theory Since 1968*. Henceforth cited as *Loss*. *Fear of Glass: Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2000). This book has only been available to me in the German translation, *Der Gläserne Schrecken*, trans. Kirsten Brandt (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2000), and further references will be to this edition.



as a prime case—represents an even “more bitter and radical exaggeration of this caesura” (ibid), a lack of communication between “art and life” which has now become so pronounced that the enclosures can become almost immaterial. This is a “solitary Miesian stage” (Loss 387), from which all objects are banned, and furniture and sculpture (for instance the sculpture by Kolbe in the Pavilion) are doomed to remain foreign intrusions, or merely pasted-in elements in a collage. In this Mies produces a fundamentally “anti-sensorial architecture” that turns the outside into a mere representation, a flat image seen through a window, as in the Tugendhat House, which for Quetglas, in contrast to other interpreters, emphatically rejects the continuity of inner and outer space. He acknowledges the often-cited influence of Frank Lloyd Wright, for instance in the brick country house (1922), but concludes that the treatment of space is the “exact photographic negative of any prairie house” (Loss 388). What Mies creates is not flowing continuity and openness, but walls, partitions, and seclusion, a process that reaches its first high point in Barcelona: “To look into the Pavilion is to find oneself excluded,” Quetglas concludes.

In this reading, then, the Barcelona Pavilion is the

Le Corbusier,
Villa Garches,
1927, Garches.

complete negation of the organic thinking of expressionism, which for Quetglas was the case already in the earlier skyscrapers.⁵¹ The initiatory qualities of Taut's Glass House, its quest for a higher synthesis of mind and nature that would turn it into a "unequivocal *Gesamtkunstwerk* in harmony [...] with the qualities that the visitor has recognized in himself" (Loss 390), have all been evacuated from Mies's work. There is a "bitter distance" between the "cosmic communism" of Taut and that which in Mies already heralds the advent of the International Style, which Quetglas ascribes to his "Catholicism," and later in the book version somewhat erratically also to a growing German militarism.⁵²

The visitor can never truly enter this space, since it is built to appear as an "empty stage" or a "theater where the Subject must be absent" (ibid). When the reflective surfaces return the visitor's gaze, they do not even encourage him to fantasize, but only to wait "in vain for the arrival of God to this pure and empty stage" (Loss 391). The echoes of Heidegger in this phrase are obvious, but as a final support for this interpretation Quetglas cites Tafuri, and introduces yet another version of the *topos* of silence: the Pavilion, in Tafuri's reading, is an "empty place of absence" that radiates the "negativity of the metropolis," it is made up of those "signs devoid of sense" that we all experience daily, and in this and *only this* sense (or rather: *withdrawal*

51. "This disinterest in the neighboring buildings is the reason why one should not confuse these buildings with expressionist experiments. An expressionist building [...] crowns the city, it forms the apex of its site, picks up and intensifies the energy lines of the buildings and the surroundings, it animates that which was inert before it arrived, and awakens the potentialities of the place. What kind of events do Mies' buildings transfer to its surroundings? None" (*Der Gläserne Schrecken* 78). In this they are more reminiscent of Schwitters' "Merz cacophonies" than the "symphonic masses" of expressionism (ibid).

52. See *Der Gläserne Schrecken*, 167ff.



of sense), this "absolute silence," can there be a place of the "audience in an absence."⁵³ The glassy surfaces not only return the gaze and point to an irredeemable split in the world, but they also absorb language, and just like those interpretations that point to multiplication, dislocation, and straying—that the Pavilion makes us lose our way among a plethora of contradictory signs—this reading too once more brings us back, although by an apparently different route (the profusion of indeterminate meaning in the end being equal to non-meaning), to the zero-point of absence. But what is this zero-point, can something more be said about this absence and this silence other than through what negative theology refers to as the "aphatic" way, i.e., by heaping language upon it? And furthermore, what, if any, is the *identity* of such a thing as absence and silence? Is it simply *one*?

6. Silences

A first answer to this question would be that there are indeed many other silences—different though related: for example the emptying out and fragmentation of language, as a tragedy or

53. The quotes are from Tafuri's essay "Il teatro come 'città virtuale'". Dal Cabaret Voltaire al Totaltheater," in *Lotus* 17 (Dec 1977).

Walter Gropius,
Bauhaus building,
1919-1925, Dessau.

as an aesthetic option, seen in the writing on the white surface of Flaubert and Mallarmé as well as other subsequent modes of a “zero degree of writing,” such as the *White on White* of Malevich and the various monochromes from the early 1950s and onwards. These “silences” belong to one of the most well-rehearsed tropes of artistic modernity. The meaning of such a general theoretical zero degree is however highly contested, as are all of its various artistic manifestations, from the white surfaces in painting and architecture, to the blankness of the page as the support of writing: do they signify the refusal of signification, or a paradoxical passage from the sensuousness of the support to the “concept,” to Art in general, or the opening of the work to the sphere of affects and effects, of the text to the context in the widest sense of the term?⁵⁴

Let us begin by once more taking our cue from one of the most subtle analyses of silencing and emptying out as a form of resistance, and which seems to hover in the background of several of the readings of Mies mentioned above, i.e. the work of Adorno, and particularly his discussion of Beckett. In the essay “Trying to Understand Endgame,”⁵⁵ the idea of a destruction of language that opens onto silence reaches a decisive limit, which Adorno had already approached, although more hesitantly, in his reading of Schönberg in *Philosophy of New Music*. In Schönberg there appears the necessity of estranging oneself from one’s own subjectivity by alienating the mimetic impulse to a pseudo-objective construction (the composer has “become the

mere executor of his own intentions,” Adorno says) which comes out of the musical material itself, and reifies it in its innermost core—a reification which is *necessary* precisely as a counter-impulse to a petrified humanism that wants to restore “values” and “pleasure” in music. In his reading of Beckett, Adorno reaches a similar result: in the systematic dismantling of the communicative potential of language, Beckett probes the innermost core of reification in such a way that it becomes increasingly difficult to make the very distinction between an *affirmation* and a *critique* of the order of things, just as the reification of the composer Schönberg’s intention is itself a result of the *interiorizing* of the division of labor and the abstraction of the commodity into the process of composing. This indeterminacy of meaning on the level of interpretation is brought about by the play’s own destruction of literary meaning, which however has to be *understood* by philosophy, in a movement that, while refusing “philosophical mediation,” also calls upon the work of the concept as the work of the negative: “Understanding it [*Endgame*] can mean nothing other than understanding its incomprehensibility, or concretely reconstructing its meaning structure—that it has none” (*Endgame* 120). Philosophy must measure up to the task of sacrificing its desire to dominate the work, although this in a certain sense implies another and more secret mastery that consists in being able not to solve, but to preserve the riddle as *riddle*: “The interpretive word, therefore, cannot recuperate Beckett, while his dramaturgy—precisely by virtue of its of its limitations to exploded facticity—twitches beyond it, pointing to interpenetration in its essence as riddle. One could almost designate as the criterion of relevant philosophy today whether it is up to that task.” (*Endgame* 122)

The understanding produced by philosophy, which is not a subsumption under a concept but a self-limitation of the concept *through* the concept, as it were “prompts” (in

54. The literature on the topic is nothing short of inexhaustible; recent essential texts include Thierry de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 19956); Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1995); Branden W. Joseph, “White on White,” in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 27 No. 1 (Autumn, 2000): 90-121.

55. “Versuch, das Endspiel zu verstehen,” *Noten zur Literatur, Gesamelte Schriften*, vol 11; trans. Michael T. Jones as “Trying to Understand Endgame” in *New German Critique*, vol. 26 (Spring-Summer, 1982): 119-150. Henceforth cited as *Endgame*.

the sense of a stage prompter, perhaps even a ventriloquist) the necessary content that the work itself must prohibit itself from ever proposing. Beckett's text enacts the ultimate reification of language from within, whereas the reading proposed by Adorno is oriented by concepts that are able to make reification visible from a certain distance, although without *enacting* it. Beckett's theater displays the absurdity of a *ratio* having become fully instrumentalized and which therefore attempts to recover the meaning it itself has extinguished. This is a however a historical, and not an ontological condition: Adorno argues against the existentialist reading, and Beckett's drama "rips through this veil" of myth and timelessness: "The immanent contradiction of the absurd, reason terminating in senselessness, emphatically reveals the possibility of a truth which can no longer even be thought; it undermines the absolute claim exorcized by what merely is. Negative ontology is the negation of ontology; history alone has brought to maturity what was appropriated by the mythic power of timelessness" (Endgame 148). Beckett's play can (or ought) not state this inner limit, since this limit, that which delimits *meaning*, is also what constitutes it as the epitome of a meaningful work of art in late modernity. In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno provides us with a dense formula for this double (non-)equation: "The true stands open to discursive knowledge, but for this very reason it does not possess the true; the knowledge that is art, art also possesses, but as something incommensurable to itself."⁵⁶ Philosophical aesthetics must raise the work to the level of the concept, but also allow itself to be disarmed by the non-conceptual *work* of the work, without any of these two poles being absorbed into the other.

That such a reading perhaps reduces many important aspects of Beckett's writing has often been pointed out. What's more, this reading, in spite of its rejection of philo-

sophical "mediation," is guided by an intuition that forms its historical a priori, and that the relation between blindness and the insight that it locates in the artwork is in fact an inverted version of its own blindness and insight. And furthermore, the idea that the late-modern work would as such be characterized by a reduction of form that leads toward a zero-point of silence is, as we have noted, highly contestable. The idea of "minimal art" in the visual arts, in music, dance, etc., would be an obvious case of this: it is a breakthrough that only appears as a reduction if one compares it only to what came *before*, as Donald Judd sharply noted: we only see what is left out, not the positive and new content. Seen from the point of view of what minimal art produces, it just as much constitutes an opening of the work towards a more expansive idea of context in all senses of the word: the physical setting, but subsequently also the institution of art as such, as can be seen for instance in the rapid development of the notion of "site" and a whole set of other related parameters.⁵⁷ Minimalism can then more plausibly be read as an opening up toward a new dimension of the sensorial, and Mies too can be taken as a minimalist in precisely this sense, as Ignasi de Solà-Morales has suggested, in a reading that draws on Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of the artwork as a composite of affects and percepts, or a "block of sensations": Mies's surfaces and materials are neither a reduction *of or to* something, nor are they monuments that refer to some extra-architectural history or set of events, but radically self-referential acts, not in the sense that they would introject the abstraction of the social as the conflicted conditions of autonomy, but as a "consolidated, permanent block for the production of sen-

56. *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 191.

57. Donald Judd, "Specific Objects" (1965), in *Complete Writings 1959-1975* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2004). For a discussion of the idea of "site" along these lines, see Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2002).

sations, through which the materials pass and the concepts are reached.”⁵⁸ The percepts and affects that they produce are, Solà-Morales suggests, wholly positive.

This turn toward a discourse on affects, events, and intensities was proposed by many thinkers as early as the 1970s, and particularly relevant here is Jean-François Lyotard, whose “libidinal aesthetic” was explicitly formulated as a response the limit drawn by Adorno. Lyotard proposes a new beginning at that precise point where *Aesthetic Theory* had to come to a halt, and here too the idea of silence will be a decisive issue, although in a way that attempts to overturn all of the analyses we have followed so far. In the essay “Adorno come diavolo” (1972) Lyotard comments on the theory proposed in Adorno’s *Philosophy of New Music*, where Schönberg and the formal and de-subjectifying construction of twelve-tone music is that which bids halt to dialectics, although *dialectically*, and he suggests that Adorno’s entanglement in a certain philosophy of the *subject* is what forces him to understand its fracturing in late capitalism as a simply tragic and negative phenomenon.⁵⁹ In this negative-dialectical equation,

58. “Mies van der Rohe and Minimalism,” PM 152. Deleuze and Guattari develop their idea of the artwork as a block of sensations in *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchill (London: Verso, 1994).
59. This critique can of course be formulated in many different ways, and Lyotard’s version is admittedly wholly aberrant in relation to the more “official” version of how critical theory should be continued. Albrecht Wellmer, one of its main proponents today, attempts to save Adorno’s aesthetic from the trap set by the theory of redemption by claiming that art should be seen as a process of Enlightenment in everyday life, as an expansion of our communicative capacities and not as a negative reflection of the Absolute or of the dissolution of the subject. Wellmer’s critique consists of two readings of the sublime in Adorno’s writings: first, as a result of the receding of utopia, which leads Adorno to say that “radical art today means a somber art, whose basic color is black” (*Ästhetische Theorie*, 65); and secondly, as the result of an “explosion of metaphysical meaning,” as Adorno says in the Beckett essay, which Wellmer, in rather stark op-

art is called upon to bear the burden, to testify to negativity of the dissolved and disempowered subject, and it has to become a kind of demythologized version of a suffering Christ: “Just as Marx, Adorno sees the dissolution of subjectivity in and through capitalism as a defeat: he can only overcome this pessimism by making this defeat into a negative moment in the dialectic of liberation and in the conquest of creativity. (...) The category of the subject is not criticized. Not only is it the core of the interpretation of society as alienation and of art as a witness and martyr, but also of the whole theory of expressivity.”⁶⁰

Would there be another way to approach, or perhaps even *listen* to negativity and silence, and to approach the void as a positive phenomenon? The example of John Cage is perhaps almost too obvious here, but it is precisely the idea of silence in Cage that allows Lyotard, at least in the immediate context of music, to propose his bold countermove to Adorno’s negative dialectic in an essay entitled “Plusieurs silences”—“several silences.” Such a listening would be an openness to a non-negative dispersal of the ego, multiplication in a form that no longer acknowledges loss and absence as a transcendental condition of possibility, but, as Deleuze had already pointed out in works like

- position to what Adorno himself says, proposes to see as the *emanicipation* of subjectivity. The second version of the sublime, Wellmer proposes, must be saved from the consequences of the first. Adorno never developed a sufficient conception of linguistic intersubjectivity, he claims, but if we do so (following Habermas), we may see the recession of utopia not as a catastrophe, but as a discovery of the communicative potential of finite spirit. See Wellmer, “Adorno, die Moderne und das Erhabene,” in Franz Koppe (ed.): *Perspektiven der Kunstphilosophie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991).
60. “Adorno come diavolo,” in *Des dispositifs pulsionels* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1980 [1973]), 109 f. For a thorough discussion of the relation between Adorno and Lyotard, and of the transformations of the philosophical ideas of aesthetic negation and negativity, see Pierre V. Zima, *La négation esthétique. Le sujet, le beau et le sublime de Mallarmé et Valéry à Adorno et Lyotard* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2003).

Difference and Repetition and *Logic of Sense*, understands universals like subject and consciousness as temporary crystallizations, or ways to capture or fold together singularities deriving from a transcendental field that itself is pre-ego-logical and non-subjective. Analogously, in order for noise to become organized music, and for the “intensities,” or “events,” in Cage’s vocabulary,⁶¹ to become an organism, Lyotard suggests that a kind of filtering mechanism must be inserted that selects, or, in Freud’s vocabulary, a secondary elaboration that binds the primary process and its flows into recognizable forms. The system of tonality as well as other similar systems, for instance perspective in painting, are ways of providing this mechanism with a *depth*: the construction, as in the *costruzione legittima* of Renaissance painting or the *Konstruktion* in psychoanalysis (where a series of strategic *silences* will also play a significant role, as in Lacan), of a theatricality that is both temporal and spatial. This is what Lyotard in his writings on libidinal economy sets out to attack by cross-reading phenomenology and psychoanalysis in order to have them cancel each other out in favor of the dimension of the “figural” or the “matrix.” The matrix is close to what Freud’s calls “originary repression”—it is that which is furthest away from our understanding and disappears as soon as it becomes either sensible or intelligible. The matrix *forms* only by *deforming*, it founds by withdrawing, and it makes discourse and signifying, *Gestaltung* and the image, possible by leaving in them an ineradicable trace of the invisible.⁶²

61. For a discussion of the idea of event in Cage and its further ramifications in the Fluxus movement, and in the various forms of avant-garde music of the '60s, see Liz Kotz, “Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the ‘Event Score,’” *October*, vol. 95 (Winter 2001): 54–89. As Kotz shows, the idea of “openness” in Cage soon came to be opposed to the idea of a focused singularity as a “perceptual readymade,” for instance in the work of La Monte Young.
62. Lyotard develops this theory above all in *Discours, figure* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1971), and although he would later reject many aspects

It is on this level that Lyotard pits Cage against Schönberg/Adorno. Lyotard asks what it means to hear and/or to understand (*entendre*), and suggests that there is in fact a “phenomenological schema implicitly at work in Adorno, but *also* in Cage: a unity of sense not yet made but always in the making, on the occasion of the world and together with it, a unity made up of sense. Or to put it differently: a sonorous world coming to itself in the unity of a body.”⁶³ The phenomenological body is that which binds together, *makes sense* by filtering and excluding, and in this vein Lyotard can somewhat surprisingly suggest that it “requires the *desensibilization* of entire sonorous regions.” (ps 271, my emphasis) To re-sensibilize these regions would then mean to pry the subject open to a world which is no longer *one*, although not because it has lost some previous unity, but because it is made up of temporary resonances of events and singularities, where the inscriptions and the surface of inscription are not ontologically separate, but form two sides of the same “libidinal band.”

Without delving further into the precise logic of these concepts of event and singularity and the theoretical impasses that such a libidinal monism would eventually give

of this earlier work, its resources for developing a spatially oriented philosophy of the arts, including architecture, deserve to be explored. For a discussion of this, see Daniel Birnbaum and Sven-Olov Wallenstein, “Thinking Philosophy, Spatially: Jean-François Lyotard’s ‘Les Immatériaux’ and the Philosophy of the Exhibition,” in Backstein, Birnbaum, and Wallenstein (eds.): *Thinking Worlds: The Moscow Conference on Art, Philosophy and Politics* (New York and Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008).

63. “Plusieurs silences,” in *Des dispositifs pulsionels*, 270 f. Henceforth cites as PS. One could object that Lyotard’s reading imports a psychoanalytic frame or reference that is wholly foreign to Cage’s aesthetic; the missing link, if one is needed, would in this case perhaps be Bergson (who is remarkably absent from Lyotard’s idea of multiplicity and desire, whereas he is crucial for Deleuze), whose critique of negation is the direct source for Cage’s first formulations of the impossibility of a pure silence; cf. Branden W. Joseph, “White on White,” 106f.

rise to in Lyotard's work,⁶⁴ let us simply note how they impact on the idea of silence as withdrawal and negation. Cage's silence is not an absence of sound, but the emergence of plural and "unbound" sonorities where plenitude and lacunae can no longer be opposed in terms of negativity or dialectics, since sound is liberated from its opposition to organized music. "When Cage says: there is no silence, he says: there is no Other who has the power over sound, there is no God or Signifier as a principle of overification and of composition. There is no more filter, regulated blank spaces, or exclusions: consequently, neither is there any longer a work, or a closure that determines the musical as a region." (ps 288) These libidinal flows or events do not belong to anyone, or to any One, they are not the modalities of a subject or a substratum, and neither do they constitute a material of expression endowed with its own historical movement ("die Eigenbewegung des Materials" as Adorno says) that could be dialectically opposed to the subject's expressivity, since all of this still belongs to the space of theatricality with its concomitant differences and hierarchies. Instead, Lyotard suggests, they are analogous to the flows of capital, which allow for the co-existence of the most radical diversity and as such are fundamentally *indifferent to difference*.

The question is of course to what extent the dismantling of a *certain kind* of criticality that wants to preserve a relation to Hegel and/or Heidegger, negative dialectics and/or the ontological difference—"The Frankfurt School, a demythologized, Lutheran, and nihilist Marxism," Lyotard exclaims (ps 289)—is able to provide us with other resources, or if it in fact simply mimics the flows of capital itself. "There is no need to weep," Lyotard continues, "we don't want more order, a more tonal or unitary, rich

or elegant, music. We want less order, more aleatory circulation and free erring: the abolition of the law of value." (ibid.) But the tricky question then immediately arises as to whether it is not "capital itself that stages noises and silences" (ps 290), and whether the law of value of late capitalism is not simply able to easily accommodate, but in fact *consists in* the production of such aleatory (in)differences. This crux points to the critical line that theory faces when it *turns back on itself*, in the sense that it is lead to *destroy those very distinctions*, the diacritics of critique, upon which it is itself constructed. Lyotard is willing to accept this paradox head-on, and in fact the relation between these "several silences" proves to be critically *undecidable*: it fluctuates between a *simple, straightforward* affirmation and a different affirmation that somehow destroys that which it affirms; the task is a perpetual undoing *also of undoing itself*, to "destroy the work, but also the work of the work *and of non-works*"—all of which points to an indeterminacy that applies just as much to theory itself as to the musical (non)-work of Cage, as Lyotard understands it. Here we encounter yet another version of the "antinomy of critical theory," which Lyotard, drawing on a reading of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, attempts to escape or rather deactivate by a transformed concept of theory as an "a-thetic" activity whose final aim is a state of "apathy."⁶⁵

In a much more detailed examination of Cage, who in Lyotard's essay functions more like a cursory reference, Branden W. Joseph has pointed to the intimate connection between silence, transparency, and architecture in the composer's aesthetic.⁶⁶ In a polemic against Le Corbusier's *Modulor*, which Cage associates with "a police force" and even "tyranny," Cage suggests that the antidote would be

64. For a discussion, see Geoffrey Bennington, *Lyotard: Writing the Event* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).

65. See the essay "Apathie dans la théorie critique," in *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud* (Paris: UGE, 1973).

66. Branden W. Joseph, "John Cage and the Architecture of Silence," *October* 81 (Summer 1997): 80-104.

a certain idea of transparency: “the more glass I say, the better.”⁶⁷ This architectural analogy in fact recurs throughout Cage’s work, and its first occurrence is interestingly enough in his Juilliard lecture from 1952, the year of his silent composition *4’33”*. Music, Cage suggests, “acts in such a way that one can ‘hear through’ a piece of music just as one can see through some contemporary buildings.”⁶⁸ And five years later he develops the idea further, this time with a direct reference to Mies: “For in this new music nothing takes place but sounds: those that are notated and those that are not. Those that are not notated appear in the written music as silences, opening the doors of the music to the sounds that happen to be in the environment. This openness exists in the fields of modern sculpture and architecture. The glass houses of Mies van der Rohe reflect their environment, presenting to the eye images of clouds, trees, or grass, according to the situation. [...] There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make silence, we cannot.”⁶⁹ The reflections of the glassy surfaces insert the building into its environment, and as Branden W. Joseph underlines, this pits Cage’s use of Mies (circumstantial as it may be) against those interpretations that emphasize autonomy, negation, and critical distance, and that scrutinize the “implacable silence” of his architecture in order to hear the production of a disjunction in reality—for Cage, this silence is in line with his own abolition of music’s distance from everyday life, and his idea of the work as an unbounded and open event.

67. John Cage, “Rhythm Etc.,” in John Cage, *A Year from Monday* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan UP, 1967), 126.

68. “Juilliard Lecture,” *ibid.*, 102.

69. “Experimental Music,” in John Cage, *Silence* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan UP, 1961), 6-7. Cage’s formulations are indebted to his reading of Moholy-Nagy’s *The New Vision* (1947), which analyzes the mutual interpenetration of inside and outside, and also cites Mies as an example; see Branden W. Joseph, “John Cage,” 87 f.

This suspension or even eradication of critical distance in Cage’s aesthetic did not go unnoticed by Adorno, who clearly perceived the formidable attack that it launched on the idea of autonomy. In a series of articles from the early ’60s, he charged Cage and other proponents of “informal music” with a “misplaced positivism” that “ascribes metaphysical powers to the note once it has been liberated from all supposed superstructural baggage,”⁷⁰ a naïve immediacy that takes upon itself to enact the dissolution of the ego carried out by late capitalism, or that “transforms psychological ego weakness into aesthetic strength.”⁷¹ As we have seen, the reading proposed by Lyotard inserts itself precisely at this critical point, and attempts to discern an affirmative content in this stance; as Cage himself proposes, the issue was to gain access to sonorities and events that lay outside of the control of the ego, by way of an unfocused perception that displaces consciousness and intentionality—the goal is “self-alteration not self-expression,” as he says in one of his last texts.⁷² The understanding of

70. Theodor W Adorno, “Vers une musique informelle” (1961), in *Quasi una fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1992), 287. The same question lies at the center of the debate between Boulez and Cage. The conflict between serialism (as an idea of construction and control) and the immersion in aleatory processes (which for Adorno and/or Boulez implies a surrender to the mimetic and magic impulse in art) is one of the essential lines of demarcation between what would later be called “late modernism” and “postmodernism.” For Cage and Boulez, see *The Boulez-Cage Correspondence*, trans. Robert Samuels, ed. with an introduction by Jean-Jacques Nattiez (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

71. Adorno, “Vers une musique informelle,” 283. This is for Adorno an aesthetic strength that, precisely because of its lack of resistance to consumption, immediately passes over into surrender: “it degenerates at once into culture.” (314)

72. John Cage, *Composition in Retrospect* (Cambridge, Mass.: Exact Change, 1993), 15. Duchamp’s *Large Glass* is one of the significant models for such a non-focused attention: “Looking at the *Large Glass*, the thing that I like so much is that I can focus my attention wherever I wish. It helps me to blur the distinction between art and

silence not as void and negation, but as a new form of dispersal and openness, can be taken as the crucial feature of such a “self-alteration.” The dismantling of the oppositional stance for Cage takes place on the level of perception, whereas for Lyotard it needs to descend below the whole register of perception and consciousness (i.e., below phenomenological analysis) and into the dimension of the matrix, the libidinal band, intensities and pure differences; common to both is that the work does not so much seek to become a model of social relations (by interiorizing the structure of reification or the division of labor in the “exact fantasy” of Adorno) as to *pass beyond* them, or even *forget* them.⁷³ Only if we escape the model of consciousness and everything that is concomitant with it can we hear what is germinating inside these plural silences, and to turn “in the direction of no matter what eventuality.”⁷⁴

life and produces a kind of silence in the work itself. There is nothing in it that requires me to look in one place or another or, in fact. Requires me to look at all. I can look through it to the world beyond.” (Moir and William Roth, “John Cage on Marcel Duchamp,” cited in Branden W. Joseph, “John Cage,” 92).

73. For Cage’s view on cognition vs. perception, see “Experimental Music: Doctrine” (*Silences*, 15), and “Where Are We Going? What Are We Doing?” (*ibid.*, 204 f). As Branden W. Joseph notes (“John Cage,” 100, note 70), the idea of forgetting can be found in one of Duchamp’s notes: “Identifying. *To lose the possibility of recognizing 2 similar objects—2 colors, 2 laces, 2 hats, 2 forms whatsoever, to reach the Impossibility of sufficient visual memory to transfer from one like object to another the memory imprint.—Same possibility with sounds; with brain facts.*” (*The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, eds. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson [New York: Da Capo, 1973], 31). Similarly, the final sentence in Lyotard’s “Plusieurs silences,” just after the paradoxical passage on the “destruction of non-works” cited above, constitutes a kind of imperative of forgetting: “To dememorize like the unconscious” (“Démémoriser comme l’inconscient”) (*Des dispositifs pulsionels*, 290).
74. Cage, “Composition as Process: II. Indeterminacy,” *Silence*, 39. And after noting that “conventional architecture is often not suitable” for this purpose, Cage adds: “What is required perhaps is an architecture like Mies van der Rohe’s School of Architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology.” (*ibid.*, 40)

7. On the line

As we have seen, the *topos* of silence constitutes a critical line inside critical theory itself: on the one hand, it can be understood as the idea of a zero degree of expression that requires a corresponding eloquence of interpretation for it to unfold its critical potential, either in the form of a negative dialectics or as the linguistic element of the withdrawal of being in the age of technology; on the other hand, silence can be understood as an injunction to cross this critical line, so that it comes to harbor a new plenitude, or rather an openness to the event, as in the aesthetic theories of Cage and Lyotard.

The first type of interpretation understands the work as the cipher of a *loss*, as a negative landmark that registers the silencing of the language and the muteness of signs as the inevitable end of a trajectory—Mies’s *beinahe nichts* as the final word of dialectics or as the withdrawal of *physis* in the age of planetary technology. This silencing must be located *at* and *as* the *end*,⁷⁵ as we saw in Tafuri and Dal Co, and in this sense its offspring will be nothing but empty and vacuous repetitions, the errant and vacuous signs of architecture’s loss of critical and reflective power, the passage from tragedy to parody. But the critical power of these analyses, their capacity to form a *seamless narrative*, in spite of their emphasis on difference and rupture, may in fact obstruct the view of what was actually taking place at this

75. This figure is part of a whole complex of “endgames,” beginning already with Hegel’s understanding of art as “a thing of the past” (*ein Vergangenes*) in the Introduction to his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, and has since this moment followed modern art as shadow. For two recent analyses of this idea, cf. Eva Geulen, *Das Ende der Kunst. Lesarten eines Gerüchts nach Hegel* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002), and Alexander Garcia Düttman, *Kunstende. Drei ästhetische Studien* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000). Yve-Alain Bois proposes a reading of the “end of art” complex in relation to modernist painting in “Painting: The Task of Mourning,” *Painting as Model* ((Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1990), first published as a catalogue essay to the exhibition “Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture” at ICA in Boston, 1986.

historical juncture where the alleged Miesian silence is located, and consequently *also* of our own present.

Thus another form of questioning is called for, an inverted reading that understands these sequels not as the historical debris of a collapsing aura, but rather as the passage into a field of modularity, where repetition replaces opposition, and where the distinction between tragedy and farce becomes less sharp, if not obliterated; in short, where the line of negativity is blurred and a different form of continuity appears. Whether this means to take leave of a *certain* model of critique and theory, or whether it will simply render the idea of “criticality” as such obsolete, is indeed a pressing issue, and not just in architectural theory, even though it is there that the conflict has become unusually sharp. The perspective outlined here will be an argument for the continued relevance of the “critical” beyond any *particular* models of subjectivity and experience, which in turn must be opened up for historical analysis to a greater extent than was the case in Adorno, and must also be opened for an assessment of the impact of empirical technologies to a greater extent than was the case in Heidegger.

Such a perspective is systematically adopted in Reinhold Martin’s analysis of what he calls “the organizational complex,”⁷⁶ from which I will take my cue here. Martin proposes what we could call a *genealogy of corporate space*, i.e., a charting of those interlacings of power and knowledge that have shaped the architecture culture of the U.S. and as a consequence large parts of the industrial world in the postwar period. In order to do this he proposes the term “organizational complex,” as a kind of aesthetic extension of the “military-industrial complex,” where architecture holds a prominent place, although not in the sense of a resistance or an autonomous art that would

take it upon itself to signify an impossible redemption. Architecture, he claims, should be understood as a conduit for organizational patterns, not just an image or an ideological screen, but more fundamentally as an active force that shapes and molds subjects, that “subjectivizes,” to use Foucault’s term. The question whether modernism has an “end,” whether the initial utopian projects were eventually abandoned, betrayed, or compromised by becoming the stock of a corporate world aesthetic, is transformed into a different form of analysis that charts the minute displacements, the way in which older theories and visions were reworked, taken apart and reconfigured in order to become operative in a new complex of knowledge and power. Perhaps we could take up another idea from Tafuri, when he suggest that institutions like the Bauhaus functioned as “decantation chambers”⁷⁷ for the first historical avant-garde movements, where their initially destructive gestures were tested, evaluated, and reprogrammed so as to become elements in a generative design theory. Picking up this thread, would it not be just as correct to say that the postwar corporate organizational complex in a similar way tests and evaluates, and in fact extracts from the Old Masters precisely those techniques that will make up a new type of environment? The relation between these two historical moments would then not be something like a break, a betrayal or a cut, but rather an intensification or a prolonging, and the task of a critical theory would be to account for the multiple possibilities for action and reaction that this process contains, and not to assemble them into one unified movement approaching its end.

Corresponding to these changes in organizational patterns, we also see a change in the emphasis on the role of the consumer subject, which we already find germinating in the

76. *The Organizational Complex: Architecture, Media, and Corporate Space* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2004). Henceforth cited as o.c.

77. *Architecture and Utopia*, 98.

1930s,⁷⁸ and with it the whole idea of “commodification.” The idea of inert “masses” presumed to display uniform patterns is displaced by the notion of an active subject that no longer desires uniformity, but understands consumption as a kind of libidinal practice constitutive of experience. The differentiation and multiplication of desires, fantasies, and cathexes now form an integral part of the *system* of consumption itself, and to this extent it could be called a “society of bureaucratically controlled consumption,” as Henri Lefebvre says, although one has to be wary of the idea of the systemic *closure* that such a concept implies. This production of subjects unleashes forces that are increasingly difficult to contain, at the same time that they also are that which drives the system. Perhaps we should invert the perspective on this, and understand society as defined not by the kind of regimented and segmented spaces that it creates, but by its leakages and “lines of flight,” as Deleuze and Guattari suggest.⁷⁹ In this respect, the analysis of the culture industry proposed by Adorno and Horkheimer at the end of the war was lagging behind already from the very start: at that moment the culture industry, as a producer of uniformity, belonged more to the sphere of the *residual* than to that of the *emergent*. The new focus was on individualization and what the sociologist David Riesman would later baptize as the quest for “marginal difference,” and which would enter architectural discourse through the writings of Reyner Banham, and then reappear in a radicalized form in the early writings of Jean Baudrillard on the “object system” and the society of consumption as a production of subjectivity.

78. For a discussion of this in the context of Swedish Modernism and the emergence of the Social-Democratic welfare state, see Helena Mattsson and Sven-Olov Wallenstein, *Swedish Modernism at the Crossroads* (Stockholm: Axl Books, 2008).

79. See the chapter on “Micropolitics and Segmentarity” in *Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

“Organization Man” was the name proposed by the sociologist William Whyte for the type of subject that was called upon to enact this new libido.⁸⁰ This was an individual who saw the company as his own family, whose “personality” was constantly subject to tests and psychomorphic modeling, and for whom “human relations” was the type of discourse required in the corporate world. As Martin points out, it would be naive to see this as simply a destruction of an older and somehow more true or profound subjectivity—we should rather understand it as a new mode of programming that changes the subject from *within*, and where differentiation on all levels is projected as a norm. Martin here draws on Gilles Deleuze’s analysis of the emerging “control society,”⁸¹ in which the new form of individuality is to be understood as a “dividuality,” where we no longer live inside a panopticon that subjects us to a central Gaze, and where universal *modulation* displaces the central *function*. This is in one respect a molecularization of power that also calls for new modes of resistance, which not only have to be formed beyond the State, but also without support from those “nomadic” subjectivities that used to resist it, since they have been not so much recuperated as *interiorized* in the sense that they now form the very modus operandi of capital itself in the space of information technology, which on the one hand appear as simply deterritorialized, on the other hand as the production of new

80. See William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1956). As Martin points out, Whyte however fails to recognize the radicality of his own insights when he puts his faith in the restoration of “humanity” through the agency of rebellious individuals, since this fantasy is what the organization itself produces, as Adorno already had noted. “To seek ‘humanity’ within the infinite modular patterns organizing the emptied-out interiors of edifices like Union Carbide,” Martin says, “is to submit to the logic of the corporate organism.” (oc 121).

81. See “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” trans. Martin Joughin, in Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations: 1972–1990* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

types of territoriality and centrality. The dividual exists as an inter-segmentary movement, perpetually re-creating “itself”⁸² in the act of connecting, and if the right to dislocate one’s identity previously was a countermove to a form or power that insisted that we should *remain* who we are (in work, sex, education, etc.), henceforth the imperative of *flexibility* rules unconditionally: the dividual in control space is more like a wave-function than a self-enclosed substance, more like a temporary cut in a flow of information than a reflective interiority.

From now on, architecture inhabits an essentially in-formatic space, and Martin proposes that we should think of it as one of several media. In this perspective it is not incidental that the kind of suspended surface that we encounter in the curtain wall emerges at the same time as network television—the curtain wall is a medium to be *watched* in passing rather than looked at like an artwork” (oc 6). These forms are not the end of something (the heroic ambitions of modernist utopias, critical architecture, reflection, etc.), but rather “ciphers in which past and future are scrambled into a continuous modulated hum: an endless feedback loop” (oc 7).

This transformation was also highly dependent on the development of the discourse of cybernetics, starting with the publication of Norbert Wiener’s *Cybernetics* in 1948, which in turn was applied to the idea of the city and of urban planning in the nuclear age. We could also note that this type of systemic theory also forms the backdrop for

82. Gender neutrality is requisite here. In the space of dividuality sexuality too becomes a constantly negotiable structure: the ideal is a flexible desiring structure able to adapt to any given circumstance, where the Symbolic, and even less so the Real (to use Lacanian terms), are experienced not as limits, but rather as modulations of a continuous process where the Law itself becomes yet another “part object.” Deleuze and Guattari’s reading of Kafka is an excellent introduction to these issues; see their *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

Heidegger’s description of Framing as *ab-solute*, i.e. as a systemic loop of “steering” and “securing” that absorbs all exteriorities and outsides.⁸³ It also entails a new idea of space understood as flexible and multiple: conceived of as a way to minimize the possibility of loss of control and communication after a nuclear strike, the strategy of decentralization is part of the intensification of control society. This is the birth of the concept of the “network,” which was to extend its ramifications into the whole of social space. In this we also find a restructuring of the old organicist paradigms that haunted early modernism, which once again shows that this shift cannot be understood as a sharp break, but rather a continuous modulation where the organic and the in-formatic coalesce on a higher level.

If it is true that architecture in the postwar period came to be subsumed under the organizational complex, then it is reasonable to trace the idea back to the theories of the earlier avant-garde. As early as 1928 Sigfried Giedion could write that the very concept of architecture must become problematic in the new space-time continuum brought about by a whole set of epistemological, social, and aesthetic changes, from physics to engineering and Cubist painting. Architecture, he claims, can no longer be understood in terms of free-standing autonomous objects, but has to be conceived of as part of a larger “stream of motion” (*Bewegungsstrom*) and a process of “interpenetration” (*Durchdringung*): “It appears doubtful that the limited concept of architecture can be sustained at all. We are hardly capable of answering the question: What belongs to architecture? Where does it begin, where does it end? Domains interpenetrate (*Die Gebiete durchdringen sich*). Walls no longer surround the street in a rigid way. The street is trans-

83. For a discussion of Heidegger’s idea of the *Gestell* in terms of a “technical absolute,” see Jean-Philippe Milet, *L’absolu technique* (Paris: Kimé, 2000).

formed into a flow of motion. The tracks and the train form, together with the station, one single entity.”⁸⁴ Giedion’s vocabulary is derived from a first machine age discourse on energy, movement, and velocity, where all firm objects are dissolved, but from our point of view it would be possible to see this as already pointing ahead to the need for a more stratified analysis describing the conduits of such forces, how they are channeled and rerouted—in short, that the futuristic energetics of the first wave of the avant-garde already call upon the cybernetic reconstruction of the second wave, in a way that makes an interpretation hinged on repetition as tragedy and farce misleading. If architecture is dissolved as the classical purveyor of order and stability, in another way it fulfills a very precise and particular new role within the emergent network space in providing a spatial form to the flows themselves and in proposing concrete means in which this complex can be materialized. Architecture is henceforth part of a more encompassing organizational technology, and it works, Martin claims, as a naturalization of its operations, or rather as the production of a new type of *technological nature*, in a way that prolongs some of Benjamin’s early intuitions.

At this juncture, the work of György Kepes is once more given an important position, although in a way that has very little to do with the formalist reading proposed by Rowe and Slutzky proposed at the time. His translation of the Bauhaus principles into a new cybernetic discourse and his idea of a “language of vision” and a “new landscape” project architecture into a new field where the organic and the technological merge. An equally important role is here played by the architecture of Gordon Bunshaft and Eero Saarinen, especially the latter, whose projects from the 1950s (General Motors, IBM, Bell) dealt with companies that both symbolized and implemented the organizational

complex, and we can here see the extent to which abstract organizational principles penetrated into the very stuff of architecture. These projects should then not first and foremost be understood in terms of a commercialization and instrumentalization, or as an emptying out of earlier modernist programs, but in fact as their realization—the organicist mythologies of glass architecture come true in the form of the ubiquitous curtain wall.

If it is not a question of a simple instrumentalization, then we should just as little see these structures as *symbols* of corporate power, Martin suggests, i.e., not as vehicles of “semantic” content, but as an “operating system designed to regulate the emergent human-machine assemblage” (OC 9). Norbert Wiener’s theories formed an important part of this process in which both subject and object were transformed into information patterns, but just as important was the corresponding concept of “pattern-seeing” that transposed cybernetic language into the field of visual perception. The organizational complex thus produced its own aesthetic, its own modes of perception and experience, where commercial imagery merged with older avant-garde techniques of estrangement, although now in order to create a new environment in which subjective pleasures and responses could be induced, predicted, and set to work in order to generate the processes of libidinal differentiation.

Martin talks about this shift in terms of the emergence of a “posthuman subject,” a term that was already used by Michael Hays with respect to the modular architectural projects of Ludwig Hilberseimer and Hannes Meyer from the late 1920s. One could ask what extent this idea is an after-effect of the operations of network society itself, a kind of compensatory fantasy. And did not Tafuri claim something similar, in the very first line of his *Architecture and Utopia*: “To ward off anguish by understanding its causes would seem to be one of the principle ethical exigencies of bourgeois art”? Might not this idea of a posthuman sub-

84. Sigfried Giedion, *Building in France*, 90.

ject be a way to simply, and once more, introject the causes of anxiety, so as to make us into the (imaginary) masters of those forces that we cannot control, and even, in a final subtle inversion, allow for a perverse pleasure in domination—in short, would it not function as *ideology*?

The passage from the avant-garde to the organizational complex might indeed appear like yet another seamless story, this time based on ideas or repetition and modulation instead of difference and negation, and we have to ask to what extent it shows the possibility of resistance. As a matter of fact there have been many counter-movements, many calls for restoration of earlier forms, much in the same way as the expressionism of the 1920s can be construed as a counter-attack, although finally powerless, against the assembly line-styled architecture propagated by Hilberseimer, as Tafuri tried to show. But what, then, today? There is an urge among both architects and theorist to respond to this situation by adopting a “Silicon Valley futurism,” as Martin calls it—and the recent discussion around the “postcritical” is the most recent avatar of this—which shows how the organizational complex penetrates further into the recesses of the real, redefining the limit between the natural and the artificial, the human and the non-human, in a way that makes the inherited models for resistance seem to depend on naive, sentimental, and regressive ideas. But the very fact that a genealogy of this form of power and knowledge, a “history of the present,” as Foucault says, and a highly stratified one at that, can be written, in fact allows for a certain dislocation of a seemingly irresistible present, which in itself is already a future that complicates the idea of anything being simply contemporary, as perhaps was pointed out by Fredric Jameson when he coined the word “post-contemporary” to describe the architecture of Koolhaas.⁸⁵

85. Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 134.

Such a genealogy would also show that the silence of Mies’s glass boxes, in all their stubborn negativity and renunciation of a certain architectural eloquence, in fact harbored a whole plethora of words to come, the promise or threat of new and pliant discourse that in many aspects forms the very element of the world of today. The shift from the singularity of negation and withdrawal to the plurality of silences then opens up the possibility for a different communication between past and present, which prolongs some of the intuitions of earlier critical theory, but also breaks with it in certain respects.

In this shift critical theory itself seems to be *on the line*—but what is such a line? Does it separate two spaces, two times, can we transgress it as if were something placed before us in Euclidian space? Is it more sinuous and pliable, can it at all be located? Beginning (but no more) to answer this question would perhaps return us once again to Heidegger, this time to his essay on the interpretations of technology and nihilism in Ernst Jünger.⁸⁶ Here Heidegger deals specifically with idea of a “line” that would separate consummated nihilism from its overcoming or transgression, what it would mean to go *beyond* it, and to reflect *on* or think *about* the line—indeed if there can be such a thing as a unique and single line at all.

Instead of a transgressive movement that would simply take us *beyond* the line (*trans lineam*), a resolute act that would finally make the new type of “humanity” into the subject and master of technology (in a way analogous to the discourse on the “posthuman subject”), but that in fact only *completes* metaphysics in its quest for domination and power, Heidegger calls for a preparatory reflection *on* the line (*de linea*), i.e., a more developed determination—

86. The text was first published as “Über die Linie” in a Festschrift to Jünger in 1955, and then in a slightly revised form in *Wegmarken* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1976).

which does not mean a *definition*, as he constantly stresses, since this zone is what blurs all traditional conceptual boundaries—of the zone of nihilism, the “zero meridian” as the phase where all the possibilities of metaphysics are gathered together. Only then can we understand that this line does not delimit a space that would simply extend before us and that we could go beyond, but that it *runs through man himself*. The overcoming of nihilism means acknowledging that the *nihil* belongs to being itself, and that we ourselves belong to this Nothing, to a “topology” which shows that the nearest is the farthest just as much as the farthest in the nearest, not in the sense of two moments located in space and time (*now* we are *here*, but *then* we will be *there*, beyond the line), but as that which “gives” time and space to thought.

A first set of implications of this would then be the following: we cannot simply leave critical theory behind, but neither can we simply pursue it in the way we have. It has often been noted that the aesthetic theory of Adorno indeed lies behind us, and already in his own draft for an introduction to *Ästhetische Theorie* Adorno noted that the very expression “‘philosophical aesthetics’ gives the impression of something outdated.”⁸⁷ Rather than a confession of failure, this is a precise indication of the fact that any critical-theoretical reflection on time *itself belongs to time*, and must move with it, which Adorno was the first to admit, and in fact is one of the founding premises of his aesthetics. Similarly, if many of the proposals in Heidegger’s analysis of technology appear in dire need of a confrontation with contemporary developments, and the assumed independence of technology’s “essence” from actual technology must be questioned, such a questioning in fact belongs to the movement of thought itself, and is a sign of fidelity rather than rejection.

87. *Ästhetische Theorie*, 493.



And from the point of view of contemporary architectural discourse, it is undoubtedly true that the idea of “silence” as a useful strategy to resist the present indeed seems somewhat ridiculous. But as we have seen, this “silence” is itself a projection made from a certain point in time, experienced as a time of emptying out, loss, and the waning of promises (theorized by Heidegger and Adorno in their respective and highly diverse vocabularies, which, however, from the vantage point of our present, appear more and more similar), whereas contemporary theory at this historical juncture rather hears a murmur and proliferation of new discourses and new alliances—just as the “geometric silence” ascribed by Tafuri to Durand at the moment of the downfall of Vitruvianism in fact was the obverse side of a new discourse that was to define the project of modernity as the production of a particular kind of subjectivity.

The void left by the current disappearance of a certain set of humanist categories, and the highly problematic status of the concepts of Nature and the Subject that functioned like the “regulative ideas” of critical theory, should then not lead us to despair, nor to any simplistic rejection of “criticality” as such. If we instead assume that nature and subjectivity, and finally “being” itself, as the horizon against

Eero Saarinen, IBM manufacturing and training facility, 1958
Rochester, Minnesota.

which all such concepts are understood, necessarily move together, so to speak, “in parallax.” then the loss or waning of certain categories should not be confused with any “end of theory” as such. The task of theory remains as important as ever, and what we earlier formulated as the “antinomy of critical reason” should then not be seen as heralding its end, but as the sign of a necessary transformation.

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