

Notes on Narrative Method in Historical Interpretation

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I have learned to think of History in a Marxist sense as comprising a constant becoming of modes of production. The present is a site contested by past and future histories, the now being a set of traces of the past and anticipations of future presents in our social structure. This notion of History is even more emphatic in the Althusserian-Lacanian sense of the Real as that which can never be known, has no presence, but nevertheless is at the same time 'produced' by the Imaginary and the Symbolic. History is the black hole you can never see but which nevertheless controls the wobbles and trajectories of all the things (like buildings and texts and cities and landscapes) that we historians and theorists care about. History, the becoming of modes of production, is determinant of all representations and how they do their work.

Theory takes history as its subject matter, and there can be no writing of history without theory. The more theory, the more access to history. Theory is the practice that produces concepts and categories to map the Real of History. So the practice of theory will ultimately have to deal with some version of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, since in this schema, these are the orders that attempt to manage and make sense of the Real.

Architecture is a primary exhibit in theorising History because architecture is the most complexly contested and negotiated of all cultural representations and productions. Issues of perception, subject formation, language, image, and code are funda-

mental in the study of the architectural Imaginary and Symbolic. The determinate context of a single building comprises all the technological, economic, juridical, and psychological forces that drive production in the city. And the conflictedly overdetermined claims and demands placed on a building by society - its patrons, its publics, and by the city - are both figured and repressed in its very form. Thus in the careful and close constructions of the historian, architecture appears as a precious index of the social fact, and of History itself.

The role of the historian is not principally to describe buildings or architects, to produce biographies, explications, and specialised commentaries - though we do that, too. The role of the historian is rather to be concerned with the larger conditions on which architectural knowledge and action is made possible: with the multiple agencies of culture in their ideological and historical and worldly forms.

I have come to think of history this way by studying architecture historiography - its great Hegelian tradition and its own critiques of that tradition, not least among which is the work of Manfredo Tafuri. Writers of architecture history since the nineteenth century have attempted to reconcile a materialist understanding of history with the undeniably psychological, experiential effects of architecture. Trying to understand that tradition in turn led me to certain works outside of architecture, especially those of Theodor Adorno, Louis Althusser, and others of a 'Freudo-Marxist' tendency, to use loose shorthand.

And trying to understand that body of work led me to contemporary figures like Fredric Jameson who, necessarily perhaps, also had to confront Manfredo Tafuri. Therefore, while this set of notes may in fact be nothing more than an outline of my own position, they feel to me like inescapable conclusions.

I will suggest here that narrative is the privileged mode of exposition in historiography - of writing history, writing the history of a discipline, a cultural practice, and a medium. I am reminded, of course, that this suggestion appears just after a time when there was much said about that privileged place of narrative, at least of the kind that assumes history is something you can see, be a witness to, be present at. Most famously, Jean-François Lyotard made the interdiction against any grand narrative and against all totalisations. But we can accept Lyotard's criticism of the narratives of legitimation (indeed Lyotard's own account is more of a report of their spontaneous decline than a call for their wilful destruction) and still insist that it is not contradictory to say that critiques of certain narratives can themselves be narratives, just as when Lyotard states that 'every utterance should be thought of as a "move" in a game', his statement is itself a move in a language game. Indeed, it is part of our problematic as historians that we should try to accomplish the almost impossible task of thinking historiography itself as a historical and ideological production in its own right, of thinking the historian as part of the process viewed. This is a task more complicated than any objective apprehension of a merely external kind of structure or influence or bias, such as we sometimes get from some less theoretical practices.

This issue of narrative does not usually concern studies such as small-scale formal analyses of individual buildings or texts, though I think that narrative does leave its traces even on those writing projects. Like critique, narrative practice is transgeneric, which is to say that even synchronic studies are tacitly narrative episodes in a larger story. And even

synoptic studies - those that treat an entire career, for example, or an entire group movement as a single project - are in fact condensations of open narrative processes.

A fundamental problem of writing history is to solve the dilemma: Any strictly empiricist account of history is impossible, and architecture can never be understood as simply a copy or reflection of historical conditions. Nevertheless, history is real and architecture is representational (even if not in any straightforward way). Narrative solves this dilemma, at once avoiding any reflection theories of art and problems of verisimilitude and, at the same time, constructing a material basis for architecture's representational function.

We can enumerate a few features of narrative:

1. Narrative is a precondition for dialectical thinking: a sense of necessity, even of necessary failure - of closure, of ultimately irresolvable contradictions - is one of the hallmarks of dialectical thinking that can be conveyed only through narrative. The owl of Minerva takes flight only at dusk.¹ Dialectical interpretation is always retrospective, always tells the necessity of an event, why it had to happen the way it did. To do that, the event must have already happened; the story must have already come to an end. This last may seem obvious but it is important to add that such histories of necessity and of determinate failure are inseparable from some ultimate historical perspective of reconciliation, of some future, of the 'end of prehistory' in Marx's sense. The past has to be written as the determinant of the present so that the present can also be a past for a future.

2. The writing of history can be thought as taking place within a series of cascading levels, which mark a widening out of contexts. First, within the structure of an architectural signifier, the object of study is still construed more or less as the individual building or project, events or situation, with the form as a signi-

fier and an architectural concept as its signified. The architectural sign, then, is the unit made up of these two components. Second, the architectural sign is understood at a higher level as the signifier of a set of concepts that organise our understanding and experience of the architectural sign. We can use Althusser's term and call this a theoretical problematic. The architectural sign together with its theoretical problematic produces and is produced by a particular ideology. That ideology is itself a kind of imaginary map of a socially symbolic field. Perhaps this is not an inaccurate way of understanding the fundamental role played by architecture in Fredric Jameson's notion of cognitive mapping, which may be understood here as the provisional totalisation of an imaginary, ideological form and the social fact that is its ultimate referent. On this view, the ultimate horizon, to return to our previous formulation, is the Real of History itself [fig. 1].

The structure should be read forward and backward at the same time. Which is to say that History is both the unrepresentable absent cause of the 'superstructural' activities such as architecture and cognitive mapping, even as History is produced by the same such Imaginary-Symbolic cultural activities and practices.

3. Such a model of architecture and history is dependent on a perspective that reads the work of architecture against a context or situation reconstructed or rewritten as having latent contradictions, so that the historian then has the ability to interpret a given work of art as a provisional 'solution' to that situation. Implicit here is the construction of a history of architecture in terms of a series of situations, dilemmas, and contradictions, in terms of which individual works, styles, and forms can be seen as so many responses or determinate symbolic acts.

Understood this way, the construal of contexts and situations construed as contradictions is productive in the long run. A contradiction is really a

singular substance about which different things can be written, and multiple perspectives generated. It then requires theoretical work to show that the two contradictory things are related - the one implied by the other in some unexpected way. To present architecture as the unexpected symbolic resolution of a conflicted social situation is perhaps the historian's greatest intellectual thrill.²

To understand architecture as a symbolic resolution of a social situation suggests that the deep problem of contradiction is representational, which is thus also related to narrative. Contradiction is the step just before representation: The historian shows a situation in a conflicted moment; a response is anticipated and doubt about a possible resolution is raised. This is also where we insist that it is the formal-aesthetic dimension that does social work, that in the very folds of the aesthetic object the social contents are richly operative. Then the historian triumphantly shows how architecture both 'solves' the contradiction (even if the 'solution' is a negative one of sublimating or suppressing the very existence of the contradiction in architecture's form).

I shall refer to my own paper on Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building as an example. In that paper I argued that Mies's much discussed abstraction should not be understood as an absence of representation or figure, but rather the contrary: it is the achievement of the limit condition of representation at a certain moment in time, the moment of the explosive expansion of consumer culture. Henri Lefebvre articulates for us this new condition as a kind of space that is produced as it is consumed - abstract space. 'Thus space appears solely in its reduced forms. Volume leaves the field to surface, and any overall view surrenders to visual signals spaced out along fixed trajectories already laid down in the "plan". An extraordinary - indeed unthinkable, impossible - confusion gradually arises between space and surface, with the latter determining a spatial abstraction which it endows with a

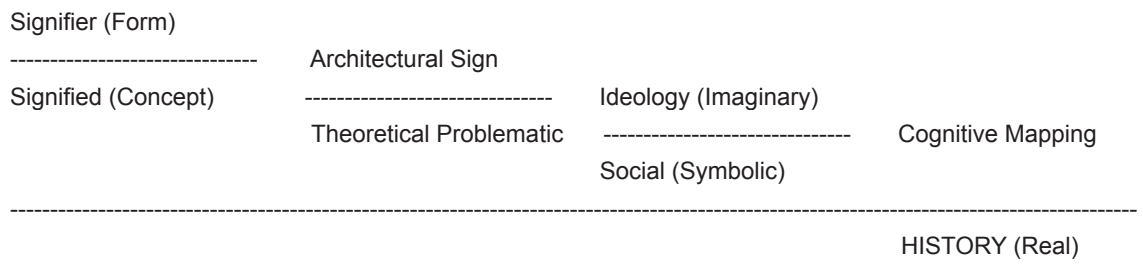


Fig. 1: The Real of History

half-imaginary, half-real existence.³

My argument in the Mies paper is that the abstraction of Seagram's empty plaza and glass curtain wall is an architectural figure - a symbolic resolution of the contradiction of Mies's desire to maintain the fullness of aesthetic experience and the actual, practical impossibility of aesthetic profundity in the context of total reification. Mies's abstraction of surface is both the consequence and perfect representation of consumer capital and a profound refusal to accept the complete dissolution of the traditional aesthetic experience. I quote myself:

The crucial move of Mies is to pose abstraction as at one and the same time the ultimate achievement of reification - the separation and neutralisation of the full range of experience being the precondition of abstract thought - and a historically new experience, the only possible experience adequate to everything we have lost in reification. Here I circle back to the epigraph with which I began: art must submit to reification in order to preserve the possibility of something more true. What results in the Seagram building is a series of transductions whereby abstraction changes its nature as it passes from the social to the aesthetic and back again. The plaza at Seagram is perhaps the first pulling back from the alienating life of the metropolis, and the assertion of the architectural surface as the support for that space is commensurate with that withdrawal. At this point, however, reification is borrowed back from the social in the form of the volumetric ready-made of the high-rise building and, even more, in the perception of the abstract surface. Then, in a final moment of transfer, reification appears as the experience of abstraction. By producing the abstract, architecture acquires a means to escape that same status, to refuse to become a mere thing among things. Abstraction - the pure sound of the Sirens, the organising absent presence - is the maximal limit of the avant-garde.⁴

4. Within a narrative structure, periodisation is a technique that allows epistemic access to historical differences in a situation, allowing articulation of what can appear as an undifferentiated mass or a bunch of incoherent differences. But periodisation is an initial move, not a final one. We should not think in terms of uniform periods and radical breaks but rather more nuanced shifts, making the placement of the specific work in the historical field every more complex and differentiated.

The case of the Seagram Building is an example of small-scale periodisation. The materials for Mies's optical surface were already present in his early skyscrapers in Chicago. The specific case of Seagram was made possible by a series of events - those related to the emergence of the new apparatus of surface perception, like the television screen, magazine advertising, and large billboards - whose results were seized on and 'detoured' toward specific ends. These events take centre stage only retroactively, and retroactively can be understood as the pre-history of the form that was to follow.

Thus does narrative history involve the narration of the necessity of the outcome. Althusser puts this point in terms of contingency and necessity:

Instead of thinking of contingency as a modality of or an exception to the necessary, one must think necessity as the becoming-necessary of contingent encounters.⁵

5. The technique of dialectical reversal is related both to the perception of necessity and contingency, and to the situational character of narrative. This can take many forms. In the work of Tafuri, for example, it usually takes the form of showing the physical and social city as the Other of the building, then showing that the outside of the practice of architecture itself - understood in an expanded sense as including urbanism and city planning and territorial management - is the vaster totality of the

economic system, the 'last instance', as Althusser put it. So the great European urban projects of the 1920s like the Siedlungen in Berlin, Frankfurt, and Vienna, for example, come up against their other in the seemingly 'extrinsic' obstacles of financial speculation and the rise of property values that ultimately causes their absolute failure and an end to their utopian vocation.

In the Seagram example, the appearance of abstraction is itself a dialectical reversal insofar as Mies's abstraction arises out of what Lefebvre called abstract space and also appears as the negation of the same.

6. The technique of mediation or transcoding is one of the best lessons from theory: to cross or shift an interpretive code or analytic term from one domain to another, testing one against the other, finding the limits of each, causing each to interpret the other. In the Seagram example, surface is the mediating term and figure, which is operative in the popular cultural perceptual apparatus and in the curtain wall, but operative in different ways.

The mediatory function releases unnoticed complicities and commonalities between different items or events that were thought to remain singular, divergent, and differently constituted. Mediating among different discourses has sponsored a rich literature that addresses itself to a whole range of practical issues - the role of the unconscious, the socially constructed body, ecology, the politics of spatial relations, and more.

7. Totalisation is meant to function as a prescription to strive constantly to relate and connect, to situate and interpret each object or event in the contexts and conditions of possibility that enable it and limit it. Of course, this is practically impossible; totalisation must remain an aspiration of the historian, not an accomplishment. The aspiration to totalise leads us back to the problem of representation, for

the totalisation is an absent structure rather than something that can be grasped empirically or even analytically. Like History, the totalisation is not available for representation. And yet we must strive to narrate it.

In particular, I have in mind the Sartrean terminological version wherein 'totalisation' is opposed to a hypostatized and inert 'totality' to become the correlate of 'praxis' itself. That is, the reified 'practico-inert' is to totality as praxis is to totalisation, the last being understood as a 'developing activity which cannot cease without the multiplicity reverting to its original statute... The activity attempts the most rigorous synthesis of the most differentiated multiplicity'.⁶

By totalisation I do not mean a normative unity imposed by architecture or the historian on a situation where none actually exists; nor do I mean that the particular must everywhere represent the general. A totalisation is not a unity. I have in mind, rather, a discontinuous finitude in which seemingly discreet and compartmentalised events and images are made to relate to one another in concrete and material ways, or better, are made through a mediating figure to be seen again as relating to one another, since they were never really separate to begin with.

We can think of the early Miesian plan grid and reiterative steel frame, together with the serialised facade as the spatial figure adequate for an entire range of modern experiences, from the standardisation and mass production of Henry Ford's assembly lines, to Fredrick Taylor's labour processes and workshop organisations, to the reification of Georg Lukács's modern labourer. In the Seagram building that grid is morphed into an optical surface, a new mediating figure that also includes the surface of the billboard, the surface of television, the surface of abstract space itself. This example suggests a way in which an architectural figure can carry the idea

of a real social situation within itself as a constant reminder, like a phantom limb that has been surgically amputated but nevertheless emits a constant reminder of its non-existence.

We must recognise here, of course, that through its very success in so modulating and focussing our perception of the situation, the totalising process also survives in the form of reified categories that should be understood as an obstacle to spontaneity and heterogeneity. Perhaps any totalisation must end up being transformed into its own representation, as Sartre said, 'just as the unity of a medallion is the passive remnant of its being struck.'

8. I have listed a few of the attributes of narrative method. I will close by saying something about the particular form I believe that narratives must take. While it is certain that new modes of analysis and exposition should be constantly explored, the fundamental work of the historian is writing.

I would like to attribute to the writing of history a certain programmatic difficulty. First, writing should sink itself into the unnaturalness of the work of writing history, of the hermeneutic situation, of the historicity of the historian and the written-ness of historiography. Of all the techniques, this is perhaps the most difficult: thinking historiography as a historical and ideological production in its own right. It is also a matter of thinking the positive side of ideology as well as the negative, at the same time, of understanding that ideology makes things possible as well as closes things down. Second, history should be written so that something - some final resolution, some mystery - remains something out of reach. We should be suspicious of a thesis that de-mystifies too much, that makes the architecture under analysis look easy. The reader should be asked by the writing, instead, to constantly think another side, an outside, an external face of the apparent concepts, which can never be visible or accessible but which we must vigilantly reckon into our sense, in the form

of effects. This requires sentences that strive to hold contradictory concepts together.

To put it a different way, the practice of writing I am proposing would be a force that thickens the situation, slows thinking down, that keeps something of the human mystery that stands opposed to a text that is too packaged and easy.

It is at this point that we should also recognise that no method or tool of interpretation should be discarded offhand. In other words, the least interesting way to intervene in a debate over techniques of interpretation is to declare one of them right and the others wrong. Almost any technique has some local validity, some possibilities as well as limitations, and depending on the project, a variety will have to be tried out and combined. What is most needed is openness and flexibility of mind, and generosity of spirit.

Notes

1. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. by S.W. Dyde (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus, 1996). An excellent account of historical necessity as theorised by Fredric Jameson is Steven Helmling, *The Success and Failure of Fredric Jameson* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001).
2. Claude Lévi-Strauss interprets art as such a symbolic resolution. See especially *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1963).
3. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by D. Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991), p. 313.
4. K. Michael Hays, 'Abstraction's Appearance (Seagram Building)', in *Autonomy and Ideology: Positioning an Avant-Garde in America*, ed. by R. E. Somol (New York: Monacelli, 1997).
5. Louis Althusser, 'Le courant souterrain du matérialisme de la rencontre', in *Écrits philosophiques et politiques*, 1 (Paris: Editions Stock/IMEC, 1994), p. 566.
6. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, trans.

by A. Sheridan-Smith (London: New Left Books, 1976),
p. 46.

Biography

K. Michael Hays is Eliot Noyes Professor of Architecture Theory at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design. Hays received his Master of Architecture in Advanced Studies from MIT in 1979, and a PhD at MIT in 1990. He was the editor of the architecture journal *Assemblage* (1986-2000) and of the readers *Oppositions* and *Architecture Theory since 1968*; he has written about Mies van der Rohe, Ludwig Hilberseimer, and Hannes Meyer, as well as contemporary architectural theory.