… or the aesthetic failure of Modernism, Postmodernism, and Contemporaneity (all together)

"Uh, I hate to tell you, this is nineteen seventy-five, you know that neat *went out, I would say, at the turn of the century."*[1]

In 1977, in his masterpiece *Annie Hall*, Woody Allen has Alvy Singer say this line in a dialogue with Annie; Alvy, the autobiographical character he plays, responds to her comment that she likes Sylvia Plath's poems for the mere fact that they are so *neat*. Alvin says this sentence while brandishing a copy of Plath's *Ariel* collection of poems. Allen's irony underlines the positive value of the turning point that occurred at the beginning of the 20th century, an emancipatory moment whose destiny was definitively set towards the inexorable fate of a magnificent and progressive blind faith in progress.
Mitrović, professor at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim and architectural historian with a dual Ph.D. background in architecture and philosophy, albeit taken outside the field of the discipline of architecture could also have critically added this example to the many he lists in his latest book "Architectural Principles in the Age of Fraud", as further verification of his thesis that what he calls "aesthetic values" have ceased to be a valid theme in architectural cultural production at least since Modernism (p. 10).

And it is precisely from this starting point, the discriminating threshold of the overcoming of a traditional vision of aesthetics as a positive and necessary value for the work of art, that Mitrović begins his vertiginous journey through what he identifies and considers the three infernal circles of intellectual perversion in which much of 20th-century architectural culture has become entangled.
The author analyses these three moments with numerous well-founded, intriguing, interesting examples in the three main chapters that make up the book: *Modernism*, *Phenomenology*, and *Deconstruction*, all of which together make up the corpus of the *Obfuscatory Turn* (p. 11).

In the **first** chapter, the author argues that the origin of the dismissal of "aesthetic values" (p. 17) is to be found in a certain Hegelianism in the field of historiography: if the individual is an abstraction, only the spiritual totality is truly concrete, and individuals are always inseparably linked to the supra-individual organic units of which they are part. Thus, in world history, it is not the individual that acts but what is called *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the times, that acts, with its real aesthetic effects. This is the true critical objective: how the rejection of "aesthetic formalism" (p. 18) is due to the modernist *Zeitgeist*; in Mies, when he writes of *Zeitwille*, in Alois Riegl's *Kunstwollen* (p. 27), when Gropius wrote that working at the Bauhaus is "part of the development of an authentic Zeitgeist" (p. 28), to the historiographical visions of Nikolaus Pevsner and

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[1] "Annie Hall", directed by Woody Allen, 1977, 29:15.

Sigfried Giedion; theses that lead the author to argue that "without World War Two the dominant architectural idiom in the 1940s and 1950s would still have been based on historical precedents, classical or neo-Gothic" (p. 39).

The **second** chapter is dedicated to an analysis of "the earliest stream of the Obfuscatory Turn" (p. 68), the so-called phenomenological approach that began in the 1970s through the influence Martin Heidegger's thought had on Christian Norberg-Schulz; the original basis, as is well known, is Edmund Husserl's concept that every thinking activity has a content: when we think, we always think about something. The publication of "Intentions in Architecture" in 1963 is in the same idealistic lineage as Thomas Kuhn's "Structure of Scientific Revolutions" (1962), or Ernst Gombrich's "Art and Illusion" (1960).
Without going into specific arguments (whereby anti-realism does not mean subjective idealism, precisely because perception is not dissolved in comprehension), the chapter goes on to describe how the "heideggerization" of architectural history is instead the origin of the *Obfuscatory Turn* precisely because of the anti-realist nature of idealism.
Kenneth Frampton's use of the term *ontological* in an article on Mies, or his long quotation from Heidegger's "Building, Dwelling, Thinking", in which he describes the concept of *Raum* to describe the metal frame in Behrens' Berlin AEG Turbine factory, demonstrates how the use of being *obfuscatory* is now widespread and predominant in architectural criticism.
However, it is interesting to read Mitrović detailed exegesis, reviewing sentences by Frampton, Juhani Pallasmaa, Alberto Péréz-Goméz, and Dalibor Vesely, analysing them as is customary in philosophy: verifying sources, interpretations, analyses, and conclusions, applying a method still not scientifically used in architectural studies, where the idea that criticism is essentially a literary genre often still prevails.

The **third** chapter, "Deconstruction", analyses the fallout of French Thought. In literary criticism, it is seen to be applied above all at Yale, thanks to Paul De Man, Harold Bloom, Joseph Miller, and Geoffrey Hartman; it constituted the premise of a school that would gradually be identified as *Yale School, Yale Critics* or, as their opponents would define them, *wildmen*, *The Hermeneutic Mafia*[2], or *boa deconstructor*[3]. But if here the critical discourse on the diminished value of vision is conducted based on a generic but radical critique of idealism, it can certainly be said that it was already contradictory in French philosophy, even without oppositional references to idealism.

Mitrović conducts a serious and accurate critique, and it is relevant that the author wants to bring together in a non-academic text the inconsistencies he has been recording for years, rarely do we find such sincere and scientifically grounded texts, even if it seems certain that one cannot reduce a century of architectural history to a sequence of misunderstandings, usurpations, and intellectual opportunisms.

It is always the same problem of the historian, well described by Carlo Ginzburg and Adriano Prosperi: how is it possible to come to find ourselves composing a jigsaw puzzle, with all the pieces finally in the correct place? However, unlike the jigsaw puzzle, where the pieces are all at hand, the figure is only one and the control is immediate, in historical research the pieces are only partially available, and the figures that can be reconstructed are the most diverse, running the risk to use jigsaw puzzle as Lego pieces, called upon to confirm the assumptions of the research: "the dog thinks it bites the bone, and instead bites its tail".[4]

Referring to the "general public" as *arbiter elegantiarum*, it is still not so clear what it is, from where it derives its authority, to what extent it was, on the contrary, relevant before Modernism in directing aesthetic choices, and so on. What is a "general public" beauty? Not in general, but in the sense hoped for here: is it the *traditional* Western canon, the aesthetic principles based on proportions, melodies, and symmetries in the Greco-classical thought as a manifestation of celestial geometries? Is it what informs the atonal music, or the eastern modal music? All these together, perhaps, as real manifestations. Or a generic *innate*, *natural,* and *absolute sense* of beauty that, as Woody Allen puts it, seems to have definitively vanished a century ago?

[2] Colin Campbell, *The Tyranny of the Yale Critics*, in «The New York Times», 9 February 1986.
[3] In Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey H. Hartman e J. Hillis Miller, "Deconstruction and Criticism", Seabury Press, New York, NY 1979.
[4] Ginzburg, Carlo, and Prosperi, Adriano, "Giochi di pazienza. Un seminario sul «Beneficio di Cristo»", Torino, Einaudi, 1973, p. 84. Never translated in English.