

# Skeletal Cities, or the “Destructive Character” of the Art of Building

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*Catastrophe, “the Destructive Character,” Art of Building, Structure, Rückenfigurs*

## /Abstract

Our point of departure is a phrase that evokes the horrors of devastation while creating a spiral of sublime complicity in our contemplation—a “looking from behind” (Rückenfigurs) at the catastrophe of the others and at the pristine void of the buildings they once occupied. The voiceless others are the losers. A voyeuristic allure for ruins echoes in the void of the winners’ words. Does a city, rendered a ruinous skeletal structure, amount to radical loss, or rather to its exposed ontological predicament—or both? What kind of meaning does the haunted void unravel by the very structure which was supposed to hold that content in place? Why should architecture, furthermore, have anything to do with these notions of war or conflict, catastrophe and violence? In order to fathom the reasons and principles which are necessary to master the art of building—the “meaning” of “architecture”—it seems misleading to privilege the eros (jouissance) which guides the art of building without exposing the polemos (war) inherent in such need/demand/desire to build. The “catastrophe” is inscribed in the very art of building that lacks its purported meaning. Agamben’s “means without end.” We propose to design the domain whereby indulging into this questioning is possible. A reciprocal commitment to create the conditions for a suspension of judgement – the conditions whereby the humane dialogue takes place. We invite architects to partake in it and “take [them] to the threshold of the building [they] shall not build” (*Eupalinos, or the Architect*).

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Third came the people of the bronze age, with fiercer natures, readier to indulge in savage warfare, but not yet vicious. The harsh iron age was last. Immediately every kind of wickedness erupted into this age of baser natures: truth, shame and honour vanished; in their place were fraud, deceit, and trickery, violence and pernicious desires. They set sails to the wind, though as yet the seamen had poor knowledge of their use, and the ships' keels that once were trees standing amongst high mountains, now leaped through uncharted waves. The land that was once common to all, as the light of the sun is, and the air, was marked out, to its furthest boundaries, by wary surveyors. Not only did they demand the crops and the food the rich soil owed them, but they entered the bowels of the earth, and excavating brought up the wealth it had concealed in shade, wealth that incites men to crime.

—Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, Book I

### **A catastrophe of nature or art**

*"Thus, the relief and design of structures appears more clearly when content, which is the living energy of meaning, is neutralized. Somewhat like the architecture of an uninhabited or deserted city, reduced to its skeleton by some catastrophe of nature or art. A city no longer inhabited, not simply left behind, but haunted by meaning and culture."<sup>1</sup>*

### **A "Catastrophe of Nature"?**

Derrida points to the remains of cities devastated by natural or artificial events which expose, in their aftermath, their "relief and design of structures": earthquakes, tsunamis, plagues or wars and destructions—we may surmise. Such dramatic events are all generalized as "some catastrophe of nature or of art." Derrida's "catastrophe of nature" does not rid us of responsibility, since Anthropocene's nefarious, ubiquitous effect upon nature is unleashing its devastating power time and again. Natural events are no longer so, permutating into artificial catastrophes. During the pandemic (which could burst out again, unexpectedly), it was strange, indeed, to inhabit a world whereby the skies were closing on us, where immured quarantined medieval cities made a travesty of globalization, when a plague was exported in lieu of cheap merchandise. T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land* (1922) presages the predicament of modern cities, whereby bristling, vital capitals of the world turned ghostlike. Every sign of human affection, community and communion, had become potentially deadly.

In this dystopian reality—this uncanny reversal—the erotic drive and the death drive exchanged places; the familiar and intimate became the most threatening.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 163 (See note 24).

A “heap of broken images”—by war, by plague—by human-made catastrophe. An ironic reshuffling takes place in all realms of human existence and perception.

Our very existence may be seen through such grim lenses: “the desperate and horrible thought has come that perhaps the whole of human life is but a bad joke, a violent and ill-fated abortion of the primal mother, a savage and dismal catastrophe of nature.”<sup>2</sup>

### A “Catastrophe of Art”?

Does the structure or the inanimate skeleton of the design becomes more visible when cities have lost their life due to an artful disaster? The inanimate skeleton is visualized as being haunted by meaning because of an artistic calamity. The “catastrophe of art” can be both implied in art (the catastrophe as its own end – the end of art) and caused by art. The elementary superstition to be debunked is the conviction that art promotes goodness. Art is a means whose ultimate end remains unknown. War is also an art. The catastrophes occasioned by this art are well-known.



“Art is not the cure but the disease”<sup>3</sup>— in the sense that it is a *pharmakon* that implies its own poisoning effects (hubris being the most devastating cause-qua-outcome). The art of building is no exception. Do you design buildings to celebrate creation or do you celebrate creation to design buildings? The radical conflict (the inner war) is already fully disclosed by this questioning. The art of building has gained the status of a highly self-celebrative addiction. This is how this art points at its dead end: in the accomplishment of its self-glorifying graveyard (by the sea?).<sup>4</sup>

We have opted to refer to the consequences of war on cities in an imaginative reading of Derrida’s excerpt. We have translated war into the *casus belli* of archi-

2 Herman Hesse, *Steppenwolf*, trans. Basil Creighton (London: Penguin, 1927 [first edition]; rep. 1999), 46. See also Umberto Curi, *Meglio non essere nati* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2008).

3 “L’arte non è la cura, è la malattia”, Ninni Donato; [https://www.facefestival.org/ninni-donato\\_23/](https://www.facefestival.org/ninni-donato_23/) (last accessed 11 June 2024).

4 Architects educated in Venice (IUAV) were told (supposedly the dictum originated by Bruno Zevi) that Manfredo Tafuri had proclaimed the “death of architecture” and Aldo Rossi had built “the architecture of death.” “The Graveyard by the Sea” is the title of the 1920 poem by Paul Valéry.

Fig. 1 “The Resurgence of the Skeletal City,” Talia Trainin, Watercolour & China ink

ecture—a profession whereby Mammons and demiurges (such is Socrates' view of architects by the ending of Paul Valery's *Eupalinos*) strip naked the cities of their *senso unico*—cities as loci of shelter, work, *communitas*, culture and conviviality. Ours is an anti-manifesto against the war waged between reasoning before acting, in praise of thinking about architecture on the threshold of building vis-à-vis the senseless execution per se of building without end.<sup>5</sup>

We have, then, deconstructed the call for a paper on war and peace in the literal sense—war in terms of conflict between peoples, indoctrination, blind ideologies, inculcated fear, hatred and racism, invasions, mass murder—but have kept the motivation behind wars as *Lebensraum*, as the spirit of violence, the fatuous idolatry/ideology embodied in the very building of soul-less cities by cynical architects who collapse the city as the last vestige of humanity. The Carl-Schmittian “ethics of the land,” of conquest, parcellation and appropriation is shared by both in literal and figurative senses. And we have internalized the conflict as one taking place within the very discipline of architecture, bent on building structures meant to collapse, which must destroy for building to take place.

The art of unrestrained building at-all-costs amounts to a declaration of war. Ours is a (peace-seeking) anti-manifesto aimed at exposing the war waged between reasoning as praxis, between thinking about architecture on the threshold of building vis-à-vis its ruthless proliferation. The collapse described by Derrida was chosen as precedent and as token of the destructiveness of the war implied and entailed in indiscriminate building.<sup>6</sup>

“If you want to change society don't build anything.”<sup>7</sup> “To build more [...] is a folly.”<sup>8</sup> “Just because we can doesn't mean we should.”<sup>9</sup> The first and foremost commitment is a restrain (*modus tollens*): try to withhold from building and to fully engage in reconsidering; to inhabit that which has already been overbuilt – and this is a colossal undertaking (which includes the sweeping of the floor after such a mess) that will demand millennia of intense professional dedication and human labor. The skeletal remains of the destructive power of the art-full war

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5 Claudio Sgarbi, “Building without End: The Travails of Archè and Téchne” in *The Contested Territory of Architectural Theory*, ed. Elie G. Haddad (New York: Routledge, 2023), 87-101.

6 Claudio Sgarbi and Talia Trainin: “The Collapse as a Precedent” – ASAU, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada. Agora II Symposium: (Un)Common Precedents. September 23, 2023. Forthcoming: *(Un)common Precedents in Architectural Design*, eds. Federica Goffi, Isabel Potworowski, Kristin Washco (London: Routledge: 2025).

7 This is the motto of the front cover of the magazine *Icon*: <https://www.iconeye.com/back-issues/architecture-without-buildings> (last accessed 13 December 2023). We propose to read Douglas Darden's poem on *Condemned Buildings* as a call to condemn the guiltiness of building.

8 This is also the opinion of the architect Carlo Ratti: “To build more and to build upon virgin land is a folly.” “Le nostre città non devono crescere e per quanto riguarda il consumo di suolo io sono convinto che nel nostro paese, sarebbe fondamentale portarlo a 0. Questo non vuol dire che non ci sia lavoro per architetti, progettisti e impresari. Ci sarà da mettere a posto molti errori del passato. Ma io direi: arrivare a consumo-di-suolo=0. In queste condizioni costruire di più e costruire su terreno vergine è una follia.” [https://www.radio24.ilsole24ore.com/programmi/economia-piccole-cose?refresh\\_ce=1](https://www.radio24.ilsole24ore.com/programmi/economia-piccole-cose?refresh_ce=1) (Interview by Anna Migliorati, 3:19, accessed December 16, 2023).

9 See the debate about another “object or cake”, “supreme banality”, “horrible archi-babble”: the comments about the twisting office towers, designed by Büro Ole Scheeren for Shenzhen in [https://www.dezeen.com/2023/12/07/buro-ole-scheeren-tencent-helix-shenzhen/?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Dezeen%20Debate%20843&utm\\_content=Dezeen%20Debate%20843+CID\\_f1165b8ca424c811f43c6eb453c5d131&utm\\_source=Dezeen%20Mail&utm\\_term=Read%20more](https://www.dezeen.com/2023/12/07/buro-ole-scheeren-tencent-helix-shenzhen/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Dezeen%20Debate%20843&utm_content=Dezeen%20Debate%20843+CID_f1165b8ca424c811f43c6eb453c5d131&utm_source=Dezeen%20Mail&utm_term=Read%20more) (last accessed November 2024).

of building are salient in the global landscape of ghost-towns, empty villages, abandoned buildings in “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage.”<sup>10</sup> Cities ravaged by the art-full war of fighting against nightmares of our unconscious to expose again their skeleton and entrails—their actual senseless pitiful bare structures.

## The Theatre of the Dead

While visiting a famous anatomical theatre, a question was raised: why are contemporary architects so fascinated by anatomical theatres? And this was the answer: because any design must start with the simulacra of a dead building – a corpse, a cadaver. From their very inception, buildings are designed by architects as empty simulations (on paper or digital screens). Human presence is reduced to that of scale figurines. Indeed, even the ideal picture of a newly completed building is void of the lively people that are supposed to wait to occupy that essential absence of life – before a good shot is taken by a master photographer. Such simulations regain the same pristine emptiness after natural or artificial catastrophes. The catastrophes make the buildings regain the purity of means of their own design – pure means devoid of the contamination by the chaos, the muddiness of everyday life. The structure of the pure means is exposed bare by the catastrophe – hence the aesthetic fascination for the catastrophe. The design of buildings sets off, then, as the anatomy of a corpse.<sup>11</sup>

## Reshuffling words: Jacques-Aldo-Peter

Not perchance was Derrida’s phrase brought to the attention of architectural debate by a star-architect (Peter Eisenmann) reasoning upon the work of another star-architect (Aldo Rossi)<sup>12</sup> – both of them fascinated by the “cemetery” purity of their “means for means sake” (*l’art pour l’art*) that is also known as “the autonomy of architecture.” Autonomy from what, from whom?

The insistence of Peter on the skeletal *jouissance* of the design is evident in his introduction;<sup>13</sup> and he must have been triggered by Aldo’s famous cynical observation which was found “very poetic” by the students:

*“Anyone who remembers European cities after the bombings of the last war retains an image of disemboweled houses where, amid the rubble, fragments of familiar places remained standing, with their colors of faded*

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10 Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, edited and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 249.

11 This was a smart observation made by a student while visiting a famous anatomical theatre. My question was: why are contemporary architects so fascinated by anatomical theatres? And she answered: because you must start any design with the simulacrum of a dead building.

12 Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City* (Introduction by Peter Eisenman, translated by Diane Ghirardo and Johan Ockman, revised for the American Edition by Aldo Rossi and Peter Eisenman), Cambridge-MA: The MIT Press, 1982.

13 See the Introduction by Peter Eisenmann in Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, 5.

wallpaper, laundry hanging suspended in the air, barking dogs-the untidy intimacy of places. And always we could see the house of our childhood, strangely aged, present in the flux of the city. Images, engravings, and photographs of these disemboweled cities, record this vision. Destruction and demolition, expropriation and rapid changes in use and as a result of speculation and obsolescence, are the most recognizable signs of urban dynamics. But beyond all else, the images suggest the interrupted destiny of the individual, of his often sad and difficult participation in the destiny of the collective. This vision in its entirety seems to be reflected with a quality of permanence in urban monuments. Monuments, signs of the collective will as expressed through the principles of architecture, offer themselves as primary elements, fixed points in the urban dynamic. The laws of reality and their modifications thus constitute the structure of human creation. It is the purpose of this study to organize and order these principal problems of urban science."<sup>14</sup>

The "catastrophe of nature or art" is reversed in the privileged-dire condition for observing that which otherwise remains hidden: "the recognizable sign of urban dynamics" and the "urban science" of their void. But that which otherwise remains hidden is not merely the purity of "the permanence," but also its "dirty thought," the inner conflict inherent in the art of building: to design a building you must first start with the simulacrum of a dead building and to build it you must destroy resources by taking hold of something which does not belong to the perpetrator of the act of possession.<sup>15</sup> The allure for ruins is embedded in the ontology of the art of building as a return to the anatomical virtual theatre it springs from. Cynically enough, the return to its inception is indifferent to its cause —natural or artificial. It must just be a catastrophe. The theory of the value of ruins: Das Ruinenwerttheorie."<sup>16</sup>

When destruction (by nature or art) takes place, then the uncanny (*Unheimliche*) logic of building design is revealed. And here Aldo can take his laconic stance whereby Peter joins in. Once a city is reduced to its skeletal remains, and life is rendered but a haunting ghost, then one can see how the "underground"<sup>17</sup> logic of building design works. A building must become definitively and ideally

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14 Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, 22.

15 There is always a spoiled subtraction that is inevitably created somewhere-else in order to satisfy our desire to build: each construction has its own quarry. Considering how much we have to spoil, destroy and subtract in order to build, this would be already a "sufficient reason" to apologize. Building implies an act of violence for which we should always make amends. "Separation and marking make a claim over something that was once an integral part of nature. Many people believe that they must make amends to nature or the gods for what they have taken away. They sometime do so through sacrifice and ritual or by making the settlement itself a model of the ordered world, of the cosmos: they explain its order and its workings through orientation and the primary geometry and location of the settlement features." Joseph Rykwert and Tony Atkin, "Building and Knowing," in *Structure and Meaning in Human Settlements*, eds. Joseph Rykwert and Tony Atkin (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 9. Or, more precisely: "isn't architecture simply the positive version of the violent response to some central anxiety provoked by building? And isn't this anxiety based on the suspicion that building is taking place on top of something that was unlawfully seized?" Kunze, Donald. "The Topography of Fear: Architecture's Fourth Walls and Inside Frames." In Kenzari, Bechir. *Architecture and Violence*. (New York: ACTAR Publishers, 2011), 177.

16 Albert Speer and Adolf Hitler allure for ruins are well documented. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruin\\_value](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruin_value) (last accessed December 10, 2023)

17 *Notes from the Underground* is a novel by Fyodor Dostoevsky in a confessional form, first published in 1864.



an empty tomb: no matter how long it will have to wait. Is this really the case? Would, then, destruction be so functional to our building endeavor – to understand something which otherwise remains hidden? If this is the case, then, we must assume that we design and overbuild to promote the lack of meaning itself – the lack of “sense”.<sup>18</sup> the uncanny return of the dead.

## Intertextualities and queries

We propose to relate to these three texts (Derrida’s / Eisenmann’s / Rossi’s) as a network of intertextualities, a term which underscores that these are “tissues of quotations,” rather than original, authoritative sources.<sup>19</sup> We propose, likewise, to relate to the present article as a series of challenging, poignant questions—rather than authoritative axioms— questions that must be asked in order to de-automatize blind praxis and call for its critical rethinking.

Could devastating wars have been avoided had world leaders and their herd stopped to reflect and reconsider? Might “catastrophes by art” be circumvented if city planners, politicians, investors, architects and clients stopped to ponder before the threshold of building? We have been enmeshed by the very persuasive rhetoric of these thinkers and architects and can no longer escape through the holes of the net. We shall see how Gordon Matta Clark will pierce such holes in the very fabric not only of words, but of buildings.

## The eradicated and mutilated language that belongs to the other

Intertextuality “vindicates the view that there is nothing outside the text – which means that all meanings reside in the interpretation and re-interpretation of texts and that no text exists outside its interpretation.” We suspect that the intertextual relationships of these texts hover in the very void of sense they evoke. A slip of tongue.<sup>20</sup>

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18 “Derrida also consistently plays on the derivation of *sens* (meaning or sense; *Sinn* in German) which includes both a supposedly intelligible, rational sense (a signified meaning) and a vehicle dependent on the senses for its expression (the signifier). Further, in French *sens* also means direction; to lose meaning is to lose direction, to be lost, to feel that one is in a labyrinth. I have inflected the translation of *sens* to conform to its play of meanings wherever possible.” Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). Translated with an Introduction and Additional Notes by Alan Bass, Translator’s Introduction, p. xvii.

19 “A term popularized by Julia Kristeva in her analysis of Bakhtin’s concepts Dialogism and Carnival, intertextuality is a concept that informs structuralist poststructuralist deliberations in its contention that individual texts are inescapably related to other texts in a matrix of irreducible plural and provisional meanings. The term is used to signify the multiple ways in which any one literary text is made up of other texts, by means of its implicit or explicit allusions, citations, its repetitions and transformations of the formal and substantive features of earlier texts, or simply its unavoidable participation in the common stock of linguistic and literary conventions and procedures that are “always already” in place. Nasrullah Mambrol, “Julia Kristeva: Intertextuality” (March 22, 2016) in *Literary Theory and Criticism* <https://literariness.org/2016/03/22/julia-kristeva-intertextuality/#:~:text=A%20term%20popularised%20by%20Julia,of%20irreducible%20plural%20and%20provisional> (last accessed December 12, 2023).

20 “If this constant sliding and hiding of meaning were true of conscious life, then we would of course never be able to speak coherently at all. If the whole of language were present to me when I spoke, then I would not be able to articulate anything at all. The ego, or consciousness, can therefore only work by repressing this turbulent activity, provisionally nailing down words on to meanings. Every now and then a word from the unconscious which I do not want insinuates itself into my discourse, and this is the famous Freudian slip of the tongue or parapraxis. But for Lacan all our discourse is in a sense a slip of the tongue: if the process of language is as slippery and ambiguous as he suggests, we can never mean precisely what we say and never say precisely what we mean. Meaning is

“When the end comes, there are no images of memory that pierce me. Only words. Words that are now eradicated, mutilated, words that belong to others.”<sup>21</sup> The words that belong to others are the eradicated and mutilated words that haunt. Not the sense of these words — as Derrida desires — but the eradicated and mutilated words as such. What are they haunting for? The emptiness of their own sense. They are words and nothing more: pure means, empty signifiers — and their appearance (is this a manifestation of the violence of the “pure means” that Benjamin mentions in his “Critique of Violence”?) is unbounded and unchained: haunting.

We think that we might substitute such eradicated and mutilated words with the “structure of the language” whose sense remains unattainable, but whose bombastic construction by means of destruction is for sure radically wrong and unjust. Like the super-ego overbuilding its unconscious (Es), as expressed in the video *Megalomania*:<sup>22</sup> the complete void, the profound lack of a narcissistic society building the excess of its own failure to pathetically worship the misery of its own ruins.

## Structuralism and Crime

Derrida’s intention is to point out at the destructive power of structuralism — a certain kind of structuralism. We propose to read the “original” text, whereby this quote is contextualized, in order to grasp his radical critique of structuralism:

There is therefore nothing paradoxical in the fact that structuralist consciousness is a catastrophic consciousness, destroyed and destructive, destructuring at the same time, as is all consciousness or at least the decadent moment, a period specific to any movement of consciousness. We perceive the structure in the instance of the threat, at the moment when the imminence of the danger focuses our eyes on the keystone of an institution, on the stone where its possibility and its fragility are summed up.<sup>23</sup>

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always in some sense an approximation, a near-miss, a part-failure, mixing non-sense and non-communication into sense and dialogue.” Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Blackwell, second edition, 1996).

21 From the closing lines of *The Immortal* by Borges, in *The Aleph and Other Stories* (Spanish: “The Aleph”) 1948, translated and with an introduction by Andrew Hurley (rep. 2004).

22 *Megalomania* is a 2011 movie by Jonathan Gales of architectural animation studio Factory Fifteen: “Megalomania is a short film that perceives the city in total construction; inspired by the incomplete states of world icons such as The Shard and Burj Khalifa. The built environment of the city is explored as a labyrinth of architecture that is either unfinished, incomplete or broken. Megalomania is a response to the state of many developing cities, exaggerating the appearance of progress into the sublime.” [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2102375/plotsummary?ref\\_=tt\\_ov\\_pl](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2102375/plotsummary?ref_=tt_ov_pl) (last accessed December 20, 2023). See also <https://www.dezeen.com/2012/03/07/megalomania-by-jonathan-gales/> (last accessed November 22, 2023).

23 “Ainsi, le relief et le dessin des structures apparaissent mieux quand le contenu, qui est l’énergie vivante du sens, est neutralisé. Un peu comme l’architecture d’une ville inhabitée ou soufflée, réduite à son squelette par quelque catastrophe de la nature ou de l’art. Ville non plus habitée ni simplement délaissée mais hantée plutôt par le sens et la culture. Cette hantise qui l’empêche ici de redevenir nature est peut-être en général le mode de présence ou d’absence de la chose même au langage pur. Langage pur que voudrait abriter la littérature pure, objet de la critique littéraire pure. Il n’y a donc rien de paradoxal à ce que la conscience structuraliste soit conscience catastrophique, détruite à la fois et destructrice, déstructurante, comme l’est toute conscience ou au moins le moment décadent, période propre à tout mouvement de la conscience. On perçoit la structure dans l’instance



But this observation – that addresses the nature of the idea of structure that was under deep scrutiny in France in those years<sup>24</sup> – is not something that interests/concerns the star-architects:

Human aggression is most dangerous when it is attached to the two great “absolutarian” psychological constellations: the grandiose self and the archaic omnipotent object. In contradistinction to Freud, Kohut posits that the most gruesome human destructiveness is encountered, not in the form of wild, regressive, and primitive behavior, but in the form of orderly and organized activities in which the perpetrators’ destructiveness is alloyed with absolute conviction about their greatness and with their devotion to archaic omnipotent figures.<sup>25</sup>

The isolated sentence quoted at the very beginning echoes its own dramatic void. A city, rendered a ruinous skeletal structure, amounts to a radical dramatic loss. This dramatic loss is the ontological predicament of the demiurgic megalomania that so many star-architects overbuild. The obsessive allure for building; the catastrophic overbuilding that takes place now is a masked allure for the ruins of an imminent and immanent artificial catastrophe: not only a declaration of war but a complacent spectatorship at the catastrophe that Derrida poignantly exposes.

## The Haunted Void

What kind of meaning does the haunted void unravel by the very structure that was supposed to hold that content in place? The war is already lost; the space haunted. The ghost towns and buildings that pop up all over the place now parallel the dramatic spoiling of the catastrophe by the nature of our art – of building (Anthropocene’s meta-dark-object-of-desire)<sup>26</sup> and point out at their careful and meticulous planning: we have become the heralds of our own collapse. *Rückenfigurs* into this void of sense. Reiterated *Rückenfigurs* looking at the complicity of other *Rückenfigurs* certifying the immense potency of this impotence toward the hubris of building voids of sense: building-for-the-sake-of-building. To make the means become the end is the scope (the self-justified per-version) of “technique”: the awareness of this folly<sup>27</sup> is what the architect

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de la *menace*, au moment où l'imminence du péril concentre nos regards sur la clef de voûte d'une institution, sur la pierre où se résumait sa possibilité et sa fragilité. On peut alors menacer *méthodique-ment* la structure pour mieux la percevoir, non seulement en ses nervures mais en ce lieu secret où elle n'est ni érection ni ruine mais labilité» (italics, ours). Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Édition du Seuil, 1967), 13. Originally published as “Force et signification” in *Critique*, June-July 1963: 193-94.

24 The “structure” that Jacques Lacan tries to evoke in his teaching has nothing to do with the dead, skeletal structure, haunted by the void of sense that Derrida presents.

25 Heinz Kohut, “Thoughts on Narcissism and Narcissistic Rage” in *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, eds. Anna Freud, Marianne Kris and Albert J. Solnit, 27 (1) 1972, 360-400, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heinz\\_Kohut](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heinz_Kohut) (last accessed December 3, 2023).

26 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects. Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

27 The extreme *folly* is the belief that “things become something else.” While the things we build with our technique (the art of building) only make appear what they were meant for - in our case: manifestations of their

(archè-tekne) would be consciously asked to master—not its complicit justification as a demiurgic guardian of its grandiose graveyard.

### Is Building the “Tomb of Architecture”?<sup>28</sup>

Could architecture instead be the art of avoiding building? To avoid is to make the void manifest— to evoke that void of meaning that anticipates the endeavor of the coopted designers of buildings. Could it be that architecture (the noun “archi-ecture”) is the purely evocative power of pondering upon the arcane logic of the art of building; that is, pondering upon its ancestral void of sense? The humane void of sense of the art of building. A void<sup>29</sup> at its core. And the void justifies as little as possible the art of building, its ostentation. Architecture is the art of the latency that is evoked by gaining the renunciation to build – to suspend the need, demand and desire to build. To live as well and as respectably as possible without being compelled to build at any cost. To evoke the free necessity<sup>30</sup> to avoid building. The free necessity to renounce. This does not mean at all to promote minimalist asceticism. The ideal of dignity and wellbeing of the poetics of renunciation deserves to be openly confronted with the opulence of consumerism. There is a substantial difference between the art of building per se and the reasoning upon its principles. Reasoning upon the principles of the art of building yields the meaning of archi-ecture. The art of building starts where reasoning (the meditation upon its principles) ends.

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own lack of meaning. We cannot therefore complain if war and catastrophe do nothing but make clear a destiny that has already been sealed. Emanuele Severino, *Testimoniando il destino* (Milano: Adelphi, 2019). “*Nel proprio inconscio l'occidente, ed è la follia, pensa che le cose siano niente, e le vive come niente; e proprio perchè le vive come niente può proporsi di crearle e di distruggerle. Tutti i progetti di dominio presuppongono questo.*” “In its own unconscious the West is madness [follia] because it thinks that things are nothing, and experiences them as nothing; and precisely because it experiences them as nothing can propose to create or destroy them. All the projects of dominance presuppose this.” (C. S.; my translation). <https://emanueleseverino.com/2021/07/05/la-follia-dellesistere-intervista-a-emanuele-severino-a-cura-di-vera-slepoj-riza-psicosomatica-n-74-aprile-1987-2/> (last accessed December 6, 2023).

28 “Buildings have become the tombs of architecture.” An idea expressed by Aaron Betsky in occasion of the 11th Biennale of Architecture: to point the way toward “an architecture liberated from buildings.” <https://www.wmagazine.com/story/aaron-betsky> (last accessed December 13, 2023).

29 A *Void* is the masterful title of the English translation (by Gilbert Adair, The Harvill Press, 1995) of Jorge Perec's *La disparition*. The Oulipian novel is based on “the permanent, reiterated and premeditated absence” of a letter from the whole written story. In the French original version (1969) the *desaparecida* letter is the “e.” The absence of the letter is an artificial constrain, a permanently reiterated privation that transforms a self-inflicted prohibition into a perverse desire to tell the whole story without that letter. This, in turn, ends up creating unexpected meanings together with a profound sense of lack. A simple decision “to omit” (why omitting?) questions the imperative and the obligation to omit. What do we choose to omit? To this follows the ontological question: did someone choose for us to omit something that now we omit without knowing it? Was there ever an ancestral prohibition? The English title “a-void” points out at this duplicity: both an avoidance (to avoid) and a lack (a void) that nevertheless allows the story to unfold and allows us getting used to it without even noticing it: that fundamental disappearance will go unnoticed. “Far from a mere collection of nutty pirouettes, Perec's writing often confronts the most disturbing historical realities. The loss of both his parents at an age when he barely knew them—his father killed by a German bullet, his mother sent off to Auschwitz, both dead before Perec was nine—seems to have become more laceratingly painful the older he got. The missing “E” throughout “La disparition” is phonetically indistinguishable from the pronoun “eux”—“them” (“they” are missing)—and the title is taken from the *acte de disparition*, the official document that Perec received from the Ministry of War Veterans telling him that his mother was last seen alive in February of 1943.” <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-absolute-originality-of-georges-perec> (accessed May 11, 2023). The prohibition, “*le flick dans la tête*”, the preclusion, the foreclosure, la manqué, the default, the inhibition, the substitution or the Ersatz are different ways of thinking the lack and its void.

30 Concerning Baruch Spinoza's notion of “free necessity” see his Letter 62-P02: [https://www.faculty.umb.edu/gary\\_zabel/Courses/Spinoza/Texts/Spinoza/let6258.htm#:~:text=I%20say%20that%20a%20thing,decision%2C%20but%20in%20free%20necessity.](https://www.faculty.umb.edu/gary_zabel/Courses/Spinoza/Texts/Spinoza/let6258.htm#:~:text=I%20say%20that%20a%20thing,decision%2C%20but%20in%20free%20necessity.) (last accessed June 12, 2024).

The building industry is responsible for the greatest amount of devastating spoiling which takes place in the planet.<sup>31</sup> The building industry (AEC – Architecture Engineering Construction) is a declaration of war – a silent, deceitful, sneaky and violent conflict that takes place under the eyes of such star-architects who conceal their complicity through highly self-indulgent persuasive discourses and self-celebrative practices. No wonder if the same catastrophe they start with, then returns in the anatomical theatres of the schools that demand always new victims (the so-called “precedents”).<sup>32</sup> The list of the demiurgic architects is vertiginous: enough to flip through the pages of the histories of architecture and its most devoted magazines.



2

This is the misleading leitmotif we have been educated with: “you shall design buildings to be built at any cost because this is the only accepted outcome of architecture” – and this fulfils the allure for the catastrophe and its ruins. Who has set up this sequence of need, demand and desire? We propose to learn to trace and reveal the catastrophes of art implied in “architecture wonders” such as the well-known star-architects’ masterpieces: contemporary popular examples of the “unprecedented and environmentally calamitous phenomenon of the mass-consumption of architectural opulence”;<sup>33</sup> that is certainly not something “new” as the demiurgic delirium of the architect in Valéry’s *Eupalinos* demonstrates.

A concealed war has already taken place – it’s a *déjà vu* – and we are the surviving witnesses of many other, human and nonhuman, victims. The practice is literally preposterous – the after being anticipated by the before. We are complicit impotent *Rückenfigurs*. The wars fought with bombs and other sophisticated weapons are the showing off of the mass-intellectual destruction which confirms our spectatorship: impotent in the face of the fatal attraction for this devastating potency.

War – *polemos* – is not just a metaphor.

31 Glen Hill, “The Aesthetics of Architectural Consumption” in *Aesthetics of Sustainable Architecture*, ed. by Sang Lee (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2011), 26-40.

32 The architectural discourse is retroactive in the path of desire where the subjectivity meets cultural expectations. In the “elementary cell” of the “graph of desire” that Lacan illustrates the subject meets at a key point (*le point de capiton*) the expectations that are imposed upon him by cultural and ideological mandates. Jacques Lacan, *Scritti*, vol II (Torino: Einaudi 1974), 807. In our case, such mandates are the obligations to design buildings to be constructed, whereby architecture should/could be understood as the condition of reflecting thoroughly upon this need-demand-desire.

33 Glen Hill, “The Aesthetics of Architectural Consumption” in *Aesthetics of Sustainable Architecture*, ed. by Sang Lee (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2011), 27-8.

Fig. 2  
“The Demiurge Architect or The Guardian of the Graveyard,”  
Claudio Sgarbi, mixed media.

## Biblical and modern conflicts: Babel and its byproducts

And if the Temple is to be cast down, [if the temple shall ruin],

We must first build the Temple.<sup>34</sup>

No surprise if—in case the catastrophe becomes violently evident—those buildings will be able to fully expose the haunted structures they were designed for.

How could the Greeks dare give the name of *symbol*<sup>35</sup> precisely to a broken token of reciprocal reunion? How could their tongues and voices dare venture into this crux? The crack *is* the symbol. A wound that will never be healed is the eternal tear, the icon that “some-thing” must be broken apart to be rejoined. Bringing things together entails their breaking apart. Like blind men brandishing the sword of religion, igniting deep conflicts and seizing strong bonds at the apex of its immanent non-sense, right in the place whereby both bonds and conflicts are so strong, alas, so strong, as to make the contradiction the essence of their faith.

*Symbolon* is the wholeness, the all-roundness (“*a tuttotondo*”) of the mythical, of the human, all too human body, that has been forever broken apart and is forever trying to bond the wound that will never be healed. Conversely, *diabolo*<sup>36</sup> is the objectification of the body which has lost the sympathy for the other and its otherness. It is the domain of the entities that simulate a completeness and an autonomy and do not look for those bonds that are their essence: the essence of being always separated and broken apart from those bonds. The lack of the sense of belonging to a wholeness that has been irreversibly broken is diabolic.

The punishment for building the tower of Babel (*bilbul*; confusion in Hebrew)<sup>37</sup> is the tower itself—an oxymoron—*diabolon* and *symbolon*. The punishment of the quest for the *symbolon* is *allegory*.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the tower is doomed to remain forever the non-finito of imagination encrusted in our imagination—the longing

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34 Thomas S. Eliot. *Choruses from “The Rock,”* 1925. Published online by Cambridge University Press: 10 March 2010 ed. Jewel Spears Brooker  
<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/t-s-eliot/rock-1934/EC5D33C6A8D98AC84748355EB17DD4DA>  
The text between square parentheses is our addition.

35 (sun-ballo) Symbol: from the Latin: *symbolus* e *symbolum*, gr. σύμβολον «combination», «sign of recognition», «juxtaposition», derivative of συμβάλλω «to join together, to bond, to make the pieces coincide» (composition of σύν «together» e βάλλω «to throw».

36 “διάβολος, *diabolos*, *devil*, means slanderer, detractor. It relates δια-βάλλω, *dia-ballo*, throwing, rift, alienate, accuse, slander, denigrate, cheat ... *διά*, *dia-*, is exactly a preposition or adverb meaning separately, in part, through; it is, the opposite of *σύν*, *sin-*, *with*.” So, etymologically “*symbol*” is the opposite of “*devil*”: if the “*symbols*” join together, the “*devils*” separate. <http://www.antiquitatem.com> (last accessed January 20, 2022).

37 Irving Wohlfarth points out that “in his final jottings . . . Benjamin resurrects the Messianic hope for a world in which ‘the confusion deriving from Babel is allayed,’ and the original, prelapsarian language has been restored—one which is ‘understood by all men like the language of birds by Sunday children.’” (“On Some Jewish Motifs in Benjamin” in *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin* ed. Andrew Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1991), 157-215.

38 *Qua* figurative language; *allegory*—*allos* + *agora*, are mutually exclusive. Consider the etymology of *allegory*: “*allos*=other, another, different; beyond / *agoreuein*= speak openly, speak in the assembly, from *agora* (“assembly”) [https:// www.etymonline.com/word/allegory](https://www.etymonline.com/word/allegory) (last accessed January 5, 2023).

to return to the memory of the lost childhood of man (“eastward”). Memory itself, of a lost prelapsarian unity, is already a crack that wedges a before and an after. The either/or which denies the both/and.

The tower as elegiac disbandment, other than itself, the rift of self from self, of self from other, of language from itself, rather than “the thing-in-itself,” which mankind, that can never “step barefoot into reality”<sup>39</sup> is ever banned from. Like Borges’ city of the immortals, the tower is abandoned; not destroyed—a memorabilia (ephemerae) for memory to enact its everlasting Moebian wedge—the sense of an ending-no-beginning. Was the mythical warmonger Nimrod the hubristic architect of Shinar’s tower of war, of the *fascio*,<sup>40</sup> who dared defy God and men, the erection that ended up in disbandment, uncommunication and splintering? But nothing is lost. How many modern offsprings and metamorphoses? Petrograd, Dubai, Seoul, London, Shanghai... Demiurges, playing God by gracefully gathering splintered humanity together again, via the travesty of progress, by way of a thousand slaves of all races and a plethora of languages who will build these towers whose head will raise to the heavens. Meagre payment for the meagre sacrifice by flocks of workers, some of whom drink themselves to oblivion after working tirelessly for such noble cause. The rift of Babel has ostensibly been healed, as they all together build the golden calf of capitalism. And these are only paradigms of the *High Rise* (J. G. Ballard) vertical catastrophes – never mind the low profile, horizontal or subterranean ones.

We must confess our interest in those historic architectural precedents we were educated to appreciate – no criticism *ad hominem* is intended; nevertheless, we cannot anymore accept the logic that “beauty” can be a “deterrent against violence.”<sup>41</sup> Unless we drastically change our concept of beauty and stop attributing it to paradigmatic hubristic (arrogant, prideful, haughty, patronizing, opinionated, self-conceited) spectacles of opulent consumption. So, the question should be formulated in this way: which kind of beauty can be a deterrent against violence? The beauty of the void—to avoid building without end; and, since the end is not something that humans can grasp, the beauty to a-void the need, demand, desire to build.

Isn’t the architectural opulence of our overbuilding a justification for the violence that mater-builders practice on the resources of this planet? It is not by

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39 from Wallace Stevens’ “Large Red Man Reading”: “There were those that returned to hear him read from the poem of life, / Of the pans above the stove, the pots on the table, the tulips among them./ They were those that would have wept to step barefoot into reality” (ll. 3-6). *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry & Prose*, ed. Joan Richardson and Frank Kermode (New York: Library of America, 1997).

40 The etymology of *fascism*: “under Benito Mussolini (1883-1945); from Italian *fascio* ‘group, association,’ literally ‘bundle,’ from Latin *fascēs*. *Fasces*, “groups of men organized for political purposes” had been a feature of Sicily since c. 1895, and the 20c. totalitarian sense probably came directly from this but was influenced by the historical Roman *fascēs*, which became the party symbol. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/fascist> (last accessed Dec 21, 2023).

41 “Inoltre la bellezza è qualità si fatta da contribuire in modo cospicuo alla comodità e perfino alla durata dell’edificio. Giacché nessuno potrà negare di sentirsi più a suo agio abitando tra pareti ornate che tra pareti spoglie; né l’arte umana può trovare mezzo più sicuro per proteggere i suoi prodotti dalle offese dell’uomo stesso, anzi *la bellezza fa sì che l’ira distruggitrice del nemico si acquieti e l’opera d’arte venga rispettata*. Oserei dire insomma che nessuna qualità, meglio del decoro e della gradevolezza formale, è in grado di preservare illeso un edificio dall’umano malvolere” Leon Battista Alberti, *De re aedificatoria*, Libro VI, cap. ii, 234.

chance that their designers openly announce it as the redemptive antidote for the failures of the Tower of Babel without considering the disastrous consumption of resources that this arrogance effects and the threatening void of sense of its structure that simply waits the catastrophe to accomplish its inception: a means for means' sake – haunted by the same meaning that was excluded in its inception. The private and public life that is supposed to attribute to it its meaning is only a temporary muddiness that mars the purity of its structure. So many iconic buildings advertised in history books and popular architectural magazines, are violent “means without end”<sup>42</sup> not to be so proud or arrogant about. Who is meant to make amends<sup>43</sup> for the hubris they dauntedly brandish?

### **To Inhabit the Haunting Voids of this Catastrophe**

A catastrophic amount of voids has already been overbuilt and will demand a dutiful commitment to be inhabited. An increase of the world population by the billions and a sublime crowd of volunteers will not suffice to sweep the floor after such a mess and to try and face all this haunting void of sense. We return to Derrida's “haunted by sense.” The most famous hero of a tentative reaction against this global war of consumption is the abovementioned Matta-Clark. His splitting, subtractions and emptying by destruction of condemned buildings amount to a war on war. One of his craters seems to have inspired sequence in the movie *The Pianist*, whereby a piano player keeps heroically playing notwithstanding the horrors he is witnessing. Matta-Clark's craters are not the evil made by the enemy but the exhibited performance of the scientific eye that inspects the void of sense of building itself– the void of sense of the alternation between the construction and destruction of buildings that have already been condemned since their inception. <sup>44</sup> Matta-Clark exposes the extraordinary importance entailed in that difference – he hollows the dead structure of the bare structure by means of destruction.

### **A Destructive Character**

Is Matta-Clark, then, the destructive character evoked by Walter Benjamin? Or does he rather poke peepholes into the net of “the architecture of an uninhabited or deserted city, reduced to its skeleton by some catastrophe of [...] art”? To return to Walter Benjamin, from our detour through Derrida, and Matta-Clark, “The destructive character envisions nothing. He has few needs, least of all to know what will take the place of the destroyed. At first, for a moment at least,

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42 Walter Benjamin, *Toward the Critique of Violence*, ed. Peter Fenves and Julia NG (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021) and Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

43 Claudio Sgarbi, 2017 “Apology of the Void,” *Scroope: The Cambridge Architecture Journal*, no. 26: 60-67.

44 The Buddhist idea of “Samsāra” – as popularly exhibited in the movie *Little Buddha* (1993) in the sequence known as “architect,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZhpruCbb4IQ> (last accessed December 13, 2023) seems to suggest this idea of an eternal return of pathological narcissism.



the empty space, the place where the object stood, the victim lived. Someone will turn up who needs it without occupying it.”<sup>45</sup>

The character entailed in the obsessive compulsion to build at all costs, in an “orgy of development” that dooms the marginalized to an abyss of humiliating scarcity and the resources to a regime of values is both constructive (another totalizing-excluding structure) or destructive (another spoiling). Time and again, the poor and helpless who inhabit the humblest of abodes are uprooted and displaced from the traditional homes they had inhabited for generations, cast out to the streets or little less—when there is a top-down need to clear out entire zones in order to make room for the erection of ghostly Olympic villages (Brazil, China, Sochi),<sup>46</sup> railroads or (uninhabited) high-rises on plots whose value has dramatically increased, and which will bring fortunes to the winners. Such is the ruthless and thoughtless *Lebensraum* of war and of the art of building.

### **Rückenfigurs: Jacques Derrida, Peter Eisenman, Aldo Rossi and Jorge Luis Borges (with the lurking ghost of Simonides of Cheos)**

We propose to look into all these characters we have summoned—ourselves included—through the condition they-we humanly share: the condition of being *Rückenfigurs*, figures from behind looking at the panorama they evoke. Imagine this sequence: Jacques Derrida looking at the ruins of a bombed and abandoned Syrian city; Peter Eisenman looking at the remains of his abandoned “City of Culture”; Aldo Rossi looking at an apartment building devastated by a hurricane or a bombing; and finally, behind all of them, the regressive reiterated “figure from behind” of Simonides of Cheos (the inventor of the memory by places of catastrophes)<sup>47</sup> looking at the disaster of his banquet hall and at all of those figures looking from behind – as a *mise-en-abyme* of René Magritte’s famous painting “Not to be reproduced” (*La reproduction interdite*, 1937).

Destruction and spectatorship are their common ground. A sequence of differences and a common end: the catastrophe of witnessing at the catastrophe

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45 Benjamin, *Toward the Critique of Violence*, 1931.

46 See, for example, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2020/07/06/inside-troubling-legacy-displacing-poor-communities-olympic-games-one-villages-resistance-brazil/> ; <https://www.noboston2024.org/housing-displacement> ; <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/jun/30/a-massive-betrayal-how-londons-olympic-legacy-was-sold-out> ; <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0956247813501139>. In China, for instance, “More than 2 million people have been moved from their homes over the past 20 years, many of them forcibly, to clear space for the Olympic Games, a human rights group reported yesterday.” <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/jun/06/sport.china> (All websites accessed December 11, 2023).

47 “Imagery seems to have first attracted learned attention when its powerful mnemonic properties were discovered by the Greek poet and *sophos* (wise man) Simonides (c.556-c.468 B.C.E.). According to a legend passed on by Cicero (106-43 B.C.E.), the discovery occurred at a banquet in Thessaly which Simonides attended in order to present a lyric poem written in praise of the host. Simonides was called outside shortly after his performance, and during his absence the roof of the banquet hall suddenly collapsed, crushing the other diners, and mangling many of their corpses beyond recognition. Simonides, however, found he was able to identify the bodies (important for proper burial) by consulting his visual memory image of the people sitting around the banquet table, which enabled him to identify the corpses according to where they were found.[...] Supposedly, this was the origin of the mnemonic technique known as the *method of loci*.

*Ancient Imagery Mnemonics*. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mental-imagery/ancient-imagery-mnemonics.html> (last accessed June 20, 2022).



of the other to bury the remains of the dead.

In order to move from difference to differing and then to deference we propose to confront these “figures from behind” with a photograph taken by Ferdinando Scianna in 1984: Jorge Luis Borges “looking” at the ruins of the Temple C in Selinunte. This is an extraordinary image that only a photographer with a profound knowledge of Borges’ oeuvre could have planned and shot. The man Borges, now blind, is a *Rückenfigure* facing the ruins (with a sea of blue behind his shoulders), the anastylosis of the ruins of the Selinunte Doric Temple C.

### Stand Still for a Moment

In the face of this profound lack, in the clear vision of the lack of the end, how can architects promote their art of building, how can architects build means for means’ sake, instead of meditating at the threshold of the building they shall not, they may avoid to build?

Behind the rear-figure (and, as we must infer, the rear window, the window the man Borges paints with his own imagination) there is another rear-figure: the photographer looking through the small window (viewfinder) of his camera. Such an overlapping of gazes – both possible and impossible – is precisely again that catastrophe of nature (the ravagings of time inflicted upon the temple) and art (destruction, spoiling, preservation and reconstruction of the ruins)— all captured by the art of photography—of “secur[ing] the shadow, ere the substance fades.”<sup>48</sup>

Did Borges spontaneously indulge into that blind gaze into the void? Did the photographer just capture it? Or was the setting intentional? It doesn’t matter. We may imagine what he must have asked to the man Borges who must have well understood this strange request by the photographer: – “I would like to take a picture of your head from behind.

Maestro, would you please stand still for a moment and turn your gaze in that direction where you could see the anastylosis of the Doric Temple C?

Do you mind turning in that direction?”

– “Shall I comb these long, unkempt gray hairs of mine?”

–No. They are just perfect, as messy as they need be.”

Both men smile.

– “Perfect. Just a moment.”

–“Do you want me to keep smiling, though no one can see?”

–“Yes please. Good; like this.

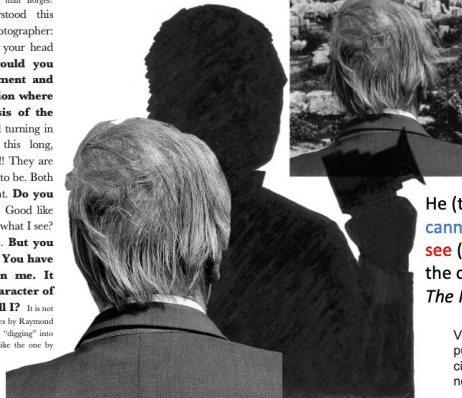
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48 “Secure the shadow, ere the substance fades’ was one of the earliest advertising slogans used by photographers, as carte de visite (CDV) photographs became all the rage. The phrase urged one and all to capture the image (Secure the shadow) before beloved family members were dead and gone (the substance fades).” [https://www.ephemerassociety.org/secure-the-shadow-ere-the-substance-fades/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CSecure%20the%20shadow%2C%20ere%20the%20substance%20fades%E2%80%9D%20was%20one.gone%20\(the%20substance%20fades\).](https://www.ephemerassociety.org/secure-the-shadow-ere-the-substance-fades/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CSecure%20the%20shadow%2C%20ere%20the%20substance%20fades%E2%80%9D%20was%20one.gone%20(the%20substance%20fades).) (last accessed December 21, 2023).

The photographer and we ourselves are destined to re-enact this interdicted reproduction of our own gaze  
MISE-EN-ABYME  
into the abyss – where our face is lost.

"Dear photographer what are you doing to me, of me?"

Behind the rear-figure (and, as we must infer, the *sur window*, the window the man Borges paints) there is another rear-figure with his picture's frame: that of the photographer. Can we imagine what he must have asked to the man Borges? Borges must have well understood this strange request by Scianna the photographer: I would like to take a picture of your head from behind..... **Maestro, would you please stand still for a moment and turn your gaze in that direction where you could see the anastylis of the Doric Temple C?** Do you mind turning in that direction? Shall I comb this long, unkempt gray hairs of mine? No!!! They are just perfect, as messy as they need to be. Both men smile. Perfect. Just a moment. **Do you want me to smile?** Yes please. Good like this. Now I can see. Do you know what I see? You may guess what I didn't see. **But you can't know what I didn't see. You have caught me. You have stolen me. It amuses me to become the character of an image I will never see. Will I?** It is not by chance that one of the most renowned stories by Raymond Carver is titled "The Cathedral" that is about "digging" into the eyes of blindness. Self-inflicted blindness like the one by Oedipus?



HOW DOES THE FRONT FIGURE LOOK LIKE?

recto.....verso ?



Being without answer determines the death of the face  
Emmanuel Levinas

He (the photographer) sees (frames) Borges who cannot help but not see who can only help but not see (he can/cannot anymore see himself gazing at) the cyclicity of lives and deaths..... (he describes in *The Immortal*)

Vede (inquadra) Borges che non può che non vedere che non può che non vedere (che non si può più vedere guardare) il ciclicità delle vite e delle morti .....(samsara) che racconta nell'Immortale.

Now I can see."

—"Do you know what I see? My profile hides something to you. You may guess what I didn't see. But you cannot know what I did not see. You have caught me. You have stolen me. It amuses me to become the character of an image I shall never see."<sup>49</sup>

It is not by chance that one of the most renowned stories by Raymond Carver, titled "The Cathedral," (it could have been titled "The Temple") is about "digging" into the eyes of the physical blindness of the other to find the metaphorical blindness that pervades our illusory unpaired gazes. Self-inflicted blindness like Oedipus'? *Blindness*, by Jose Saramago is the title chosen to advertise a famous Italian publisher with an image of the devastation that the building of the metropolis implies.<sup>50</sup> This is precisely what blindness is about: the opulence of the consumption of the overbuilding we wrongly call "architecture" has impaired our ability to see its internal dramatic conflict, has drugged/ exploited/ doped/ crack-headed the subject; it has radically subjugated the subject to the neurotic allure for the very catastrophe as a celebration of its own potency: the potency of destruction, the *polemos* of eros.

## Why?

Why should architecture have anything to do with these allusions to war, conflict, catastrophe and violence? Can we reformulate this question now, after considering these figures-from-behind?

There is another figure-from-behind that leaves us ourselves alone as figures from behind: this is the figure of Walter Benjamin's "destructive character" blur-

<sup>49</sup> Ferdinando Scianna, *Jorge Louis Borges fotografato da Ferdinando Scianna* (Milano: Franco Sciardelli, 1999); see also <https://www.doppiozero.com/jorge-luis-borges-palermo-1984> (last accessed 11 June 2024)

<sup>50</sup> The campaign is titled "Leggere insegna a leggere": <https://www.lafeltrinelli.it/leggere-insegna-leggere> (last accessed December 14, 2024).

Fig. 3

"Borges' Rückenfigur."  
Photomontage by Claudio Sgarbi; Ferdinando Scianna, photographer: Jorge Louis Borges "looking" at the ruins of the Temple C in Selinunte in 1984.

ring and disappearing before the monument to his own suicide built in front of the ocean he would never cross. This monument it arrogantly too beautiful.<sup>51</sup> Was there a “need” to build it? This is a lively fundamental question that demands the most profound practice of architecture—to live the question itself. To “live the question now.”<sup>52</sup>

## Forget the Fathers

Our gaze is turned towards the dead structure or the structure of death. *Morto ammazzato*. As we are blind watching at the dead (by art), we ourselves are rendered figures-from-behind (who is behind us? Why are you following me?) witnessing the destruction of these wars fought with weapons and scapegoats and violence and blood and miasmas (now a totally futile sacrifice and a futile demand for victims —the same archaic sacrifice that takes place since the beginning of time<sup>53</sup> now again with the sacrifice of “obsolete” human beings,<sup>54</sup> a futile boasting of futility as in the case of those archaic symbolic “gifts” of pure expenditure: the hecatomb (literally: the killing of scapegoats by the hundreds).

Will this be enough? repeatedly asks José Saramago, evoking a rebellious Christ figure-from-behind – taking our own part, being our own hero – rebellious, asking his madman father who insists demanding victim after victim, martyrdom after martyrdom in his own “name of the Father” towards the inebriating purely meaningless “vertigo of the list.” How much is enough in the name of the Father? An apocryphal mother (nature) exclaimed: *You would still be my son - were you not the son of your father.*<sup>55</sup>

We directly address this question —how much is enough — to the complicit star-architects who keep overbuilding this folly, who keep building *forsennatamente* the immanent death of their skeletal cities haunted by all the ghosts that haunt them:

forget your fathers:  
their tombs dunk into ashes,  
black birds, the wind,  
bury their hearts.<sup>56</sup>

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51 <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/walter-benjamin-memorial> (last accessed December 14, 2023)

52 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, Letter n. 4, July 16, 1903 <https://www.tumblr.com/dabacahin/159546902842/rainer-maria-rilke-live-the-questions-now> (last accessed June 14, 2024).

53 Girard, René. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. Translated by Stephen Bann & Michael Metteer. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987.

54 Günther Anders, *L'uomo è antiquato*. Vol. 1 *Considerazioni sull'anima nell'epoca della seconda rivoluzione industriale* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2007).

55 “Non fossi stato figlio di Dio, t'avrei ancora per figlio mio.” Fabrizio de Andrè, *La buona novella*, 1970, “Tre Madri.”

56 Closing lines from Salvatore Quasimodo's “Man of My Times.” The poem by Salvatore Quasimodo, *Uomo del mio tempo* – first published in 1946, is the last in the collection *Giorno dopo giorno*, in *Tutte le poesie*, Mondadori, Oscar Grandi Classici, 1994. “To break the chain of violence, we must break with the past, break away from the mentality of our fathers because: their tombs sink into the ruins of their own destruction while vultures and the wind cover their hearts.” <https://paralleltxts.blog/2017/04/24/man-of-my-time-by-salvatore-quasimodo/> (last accessed December 20, 2023).

## We

Probably we can see only the truth of the back of the gaze of the other: the direct reciprocal gaze is always cheating, reversed as if reflected in a mirror. If I meet you and I want to shake your right hand I will have to cut through your reverse because your right is on my left. Our meeting is a chiasm. We write, paint, design and try to find out the architecture of this chiasm. Given the recurrence of the horrors we keep witnessing and the *jouissance* of the life we try to live, we aver that the best stance to adopt is to banish any sort of pride, arrogance and hubris and design as precisely and humbly as possible the human limits and its finitude. The nothingness to be proud of is a poetic impulse of renunciation. We share a motto borrowed from *Eupalinos* as a reciprocal invitation: “take me to the threshold of the building you shall not build.”

Because the best of any possible building is the building which does not need to be built, the best design is simply *evoked* by what we do and is inevitably spoiled by what gets done. Humane latency – way too humane. The end, the aim, the finality, the telos – that must be kept clearly as a practical scope – is not that which we end up doing but what we evoke. Quite often this ends up being just our friendship, or a symposium on architecture: war and peace (or art and war) and the conviviality<sup>57</sup> it implies. We propose to design practically the domain whereby the indulging in this questioning is possible. A reciprocal commitment to create the conditions for a suspension of judgement – the condition whereby the humane dialogue takes place. We invite our star-architects we have just crucified to step down and partake in a dialogue, and “take [them] to the threshold of the building [they] shall not build.”

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57 Ivan Illich, *Tools of Conviviality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

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