

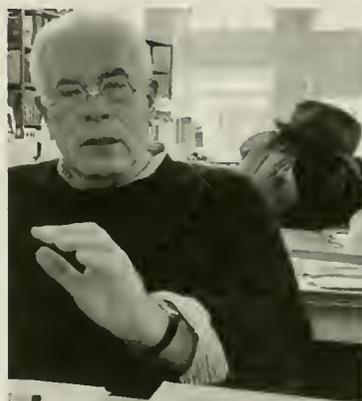
Lateness: A Critique of the Metaphysics of Presence

Peter Eisenman

Colin Rowe used to say that one of the problems with architectural thought was that it saw itself in a state of perpetual crisis. Always focusing on the latest problem or issue, architecture was said to obey a crisis mentality, an attitude partly fueled by nostalgia for an impossible avant-garde and partly by the received notion that architecture was actually about solving problems. But as Rowe also would have said, permanent crisis is no crisis at all.

For many historians, crisis is part of an historical cycle. In his book *Krisis. Saggio sulla crisi del pensiero negativo da Nietzsche a Wittgenstein* (1976), the philosopher Massimo Cacciari suggests that a crucial change had taken place in the way modernity was perceived. This rupture, he argued, was a "crisis of foundations," which signaled the end of classical rationality and dialectics in philosophy. He suggested that a crisis of dialectical synthesis in fact underlay the history of the modern phase of contemporary development. Cacciari's crisis of dialectical synthesis opens architecture to the synthetic project. In another interpretation, Manfredo Tafuri saw the idea of crisis as productive. Tafuri considered history as a project of crisis, in that historical work, i.e. criticism, is intended to confront the boundaries, assumptions, and conventions of history. In other words, crisis as a project of history was of necessity oppositional.

Criticism and crisis are linked etymologically and, as Tafuri suggests in *The Sphere and Labyrinth*, it can be argued that the meaning of critical action is to call something into crisis. "Historical work calls into question the



problem of the limit; it projects the crisis of techniques already given." "The real problem is how to project a criticism capable of putting itself into crisis by putting into crisis the real." In his terms, the historical "project" is an open discursive construct. Rather than producing a linear narrative of history, the crisis provoked by criticism is one of redefining past events. In this sense, this work and the work of philosophical deconstruction in general would agree with Tafuri in that the aim of history is to use the present to modify our understanding of the past.

This crisis mentality is not exclusive to architecture. A similar mentality can be found in painting. As early as 1986, the ICA in Boston staged an exhibition titled "Endgame," which was a response to the supposed "bleak

situation in which the art object approaches commodity status.” The term “endgame” is an obvious reference to both Samuel Beckett and Marcel Duchamp. Referring to Beckett, the curators said, “Here indeed was an endgame filled with desperate moves made in full consciousness of their futility.” Endgames, they say, “are times for desperate measures, fighting against the odds in a struggle to survive.” Again, in this construct, the endgame is oppositional. Neil Hertz’s book, *The End of the Line* is not as apocalyptic about endgames and their strategies. He distinguishes crisis from endgames, which, as embodied in the moment that is never quite the end, become subtle and nuanced ‘involutions’ and ‘exfoliations’ that mark the moment before the end of the line. In the context of



the discussion here, that moment is called lateness.

This moment prior to the end of the line also has an analogy in literature in Thomas Pynchon’s latest book, *Against the Day*. The story begins in 1893, a moment that heralded the technological changes of the coming twentieth century, such as the electric light and the elevated railway. This was to be symbolized in the Chicago World’s Fair of the same year, which is the initial setting of the narrative. The fair was envisioned as a “Great White City,” a future idyll, but in its architectural, if not technological, conservatism, it represented the dying gasp of a bygone era. Into this setting of the World’s Fair, Pynchon introduces forms of fantasy space craft that could not have

existed at the time. These vehicles are manned by youths, teenagers who perhaps symbolize the possibility of freedom and movement. Thrust into this setting is a rotating cast of characters—balloonists, miners, anarchists, scientists and oligarchs—whose preoccupations with science, speculation, and even surveillance, mirror the elements of today’s geopolitical conflicts. In Pynchon’s book, storylines meander across the globe; multiple layers of reality accrue without resolution; and the novel seems to abruptly terminate at an arbitrary point.

In addition to engaging what can be called a late moment in American culture, Pynchon’s novel exemplifies the concept of “lateness.” *Against the Day* was criticized for its excessive length and its lack of resolve, but it is precisely these terms that characterize what Edward Said defines as late style. Pynchon’s critics suggested that the author had produced a work that undermined the characteristics most strongly identified with his earlier work. In this sense, *Against the Day* is in fact a late book in Pynchon’s career. If *V* is an early work and *Gravity’s Rainbow*, which is a poignant account of the 1970s, represents a high style or middle period in his career, then *Against the Day* must be read in this context as a late work. But two points need to be made: first, this novel cannot be read in the same way as Pynchon’s earlier novels, and second, this novel must be read as purposefully set in a late moment, in American history so that the story becomes a metonymy for the general idea of lateness as a potentially generative moment in culture.

Edward Said’s discussion of late style, its characteristics and strategies, is helpful in defining a moment in time as “late,” and describing “late style” as its characteristics and strategies. His *On Late Style*, published posthumously, is itself also a late work. In it, Said attempts to define lateness as having two subtly different but related aspects. First, lateness can be the manifestation of an opposition to—if not transgression of—the tendencies characteristic in an artist’s own oeuvre or of a moment in time in general. For example, Said suggests that Beethoven’s late works cannot be read in the same manner as other Beethoven work. The late works are oppositional in the rejection of a clear narrative of artistic canon into which the artist finds himself placed. But in another sense, on some deeper level, there is a dissonance and eccentricity

which is no longer oppositional or about communicating ideas but rather expresses an ambivalence toward communication itself. This is a second aspect of lateness which can be understood as non-oppositional, as an inwardly-oriented disciplinary critique. Such late work is not about information or communication; rather, one of its concerns is the impossibility of such previously known communication. Said suggests that a lack of communication may be one of the genres or tactics of this second aspect of lateness, but equally important, it questions the purpose of reading itself. Thus a necessary change in reading plays a role in lateness.

In forming his idea of lateness, Said draws on Theodor Adorno's discussion of *Spätstil* in Beethoven's late works. Adorno wrote "Late Style in Beethoven" in 1937. Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, written at the end of his career, was the composer's response to the seeming impossibility of innovation. Instead, Beethoven wrote a piece that was difficult, anarchic even, and could not be easily understood because it was outside of his characteristic style. Adorno thus describes late style as a moment in culture before a shift to a new paradigm, a moment that contains something we cannot understand at the time, but holds implications for the future. Said cites Adorno and Beethoven's late works as examples of the complexity, ambivalence, and undecidability that characterize a late style. Said described a late style as a new idiom in an artist's work, one that reflects the artist's maturity, "not as harmony and resolution but as intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction."

Lateness, then, has two overarching aspects. The first is a belatedness, which challenges or transgresses the status quo of its time. It integrates a historical convention outside of its place in time in the present. In Said's terms, "Late works quarrel with time." Neither a nostalgic nor clichéd use of the past, belatedness reflects a sense of being "out of time" and "outside of time," in other words, it is against any historicizing zeitgeist notion. Derrida's idea of *differance* unintentionally contains this aspect of lateness, as something different from and as a deferral of or late in regards to its own historical periodization. The second aspect of lateness, that which involves an inwardly directed critique, does not present an overt challenge to its time. It is this non-oppositional aspect of

lateness which will be seen to be critical in the context of the argument below.

While Said sees these two aspects of lateness as part of the same late style, it is their differences which point to an important distinction for architecture. In architecture, this non-oppositional aspect of lateness can be distinguished from a period of transgression. If one considers the architecture of the Italian Renaissance in these terms, Brunelleschi and Alberti would be positioned within an early period as a fifteenth-century avant-garde, in which they proposed a completely new idea of a relationship between a subject and object based on both perspective and history. A second period of the High Renaissance would include Bramante's establishment of the autonomy of the organism as a totalizing system in which, following Alberti's dictum, the parts relate to the whole—a concept that remains in place today. The third, or Mannerist, period is the revolt against the orthodoxy of the High Renaissance, apparent in the work of Serlio, Giulio Romano and Palladio. But then there is a fourth period, a lateness which is neither Mannerism nor proto-Baroque. It can be discerned in the work of architects such as Scamozzi and Sansovino, before the radical changes manifest in the Baroque. Both of these architects adopt a more covert language of transgression of architectural conventions.

Tafari addresses this other idea of covert transgression in his last book, *Interpreting the Renaissance*. He cites the literary idea of *sprezzatura*, or a calculated carelessness, to describe an historical shift in reading. *Sprezzatura* depends on the subtle misuse of codes. It is a way of seeming unconcerned that is in reality very concerned. *Sprezzatura* is a maximum of naturalness with a maximum of artifice. *Sprezzatura* implies a context of norms that are known and from which certain rules are broken, not in an obvious way, but in a laconic, almost accidental or hardly noticeable way, as if the break were an oversight or a mistake. Tafari sees *sprezzatura* as a dialogue between following, ignoring, and breaking the rules. For breaking the rules requires even greater attention to those rules, for rules must be well known in order to be so subtly broken that the break is not realized at first glance. If breaking the rules is revealed overtly, it may seem vulgar, or the reverse: the obviousness of

the break affirms the prior period through its dialectical opposition. In this sense, sprezzatura reflects the ability to register both a subtle break and the ability to distinguish between overt and an almost indistinguishable subversion of rules, which is ultimately non-dialectical.

During the late sixteenth century, the idea of *sprezzatura* reflected two forms of lateness: oppositional versus non-oppositional, external versus internal. *Sprezzatura* was deployed to subtly register those conflicts as critical. Tafuri introduced the concept of *sprezzatura* in his book to demonstrate that the Renaissance did not subscribe to the kind of universal idealism later portrayed by Hegel with regard to the dialectical relationship between truth and beauty. Tafuri's argument questions the relationship of truth and goodness to beauty, to perfect ideal form. It is in this context that Tafuri uses the work of Jacopo Sansovino, a Roman architect practicing in Venice, as an example of the modest, vernacular, timeless, and silent in architecture.

If there is a late non-oppositional period following both the High Renaissance and Mannerism, it also follows that such conditions could possibly exist today if the historic sequence of the modern period is examined. Beginning with the epistemic shift of 1789 to the paradigmatic shifts of 1914, 1968, and, arguably, of 2001, architecture today faces what has been called lateness, or a modernist endgame, one that exists before any evidence of a paradigm shift. Throughout history, despite differences in style, architecture that is assumed to be critical has always had the capacity to be closely read, each style having its own necessities of reading—this is especially true for work that might be considered “late.”

Lateness provokes crisis of what is written but also, and as important, a crisis of reading. The differences in the possibilities of reading lateness can be further explored by comparing the transgressive and internal moments of lateness in the work of two filmmakers, Robert Bresson and Michael Haneke. In the early 1960s, Bresson's work presented a different use of the image in relationship to narrative to transgress the filmic norms of high-modern Hollywood. A film of Bresson was transgressive in its time in clearly attacking Hollywood's cinematic conventions, yet today would appear terribly slow moving and

relatively empty of action. It might even be difficult to sit through the film because today's media environment has created a different context for the art of film. This is most evident in his film *Pickpocket*, in which two narrative incidents are emblematic. The first incident involves a closing door. Films usually cut away quickly to the next scene, rather than wait and watch until the door is fully closed, to refrain from interrupting the pace of action. In *Pickpocket*, not only does the camera watch the door close, but it also remains fixed on the closed door for four or five seconds, creating a pause, a change of pace. This gap in the audience's expectation counters the audience's passivity and requires them to engage in the film and to understand those pauses, their slowness, silence, and nuance.

Another example is the absence of narrative action: the pickpocket goes to the racetrack for the first time, ostensibly to practice becoming a pickpocket. The audience is set up, expectant, locked in suspense as to what will happen. The pickpocket is seen entering the racetrack, mingling a bit with the spectators, and then suddenly he is seated in the back of a police car. The important action of the attempted crime, his discovery, the assumed chase, and his apprehension is not shown. In involving the audience in seeing, yet countering their expectations of a conventional cinematic experience, Bresson sets up cinematic mechanisms that frustrate the audience yet provoke them to participate in working through such gaps in the narrative. Bresson's *Pickpocket* is distinctly anti-spectacular, arguably even an anti-cinematic experience. It requires participation from its audience in that the film withholds images of action and thus refrains from producing the equivalent of literal, graphic, and spectacular imagery. All of this requires a change in reading for the film to be understood.

The filmmaker Michael Haneke could be considered today's analogue to Bresson. While Haneke provides several examples of a less aggressive critique of existing filmic narrative, he is more concerned with a questioning of the internal structure of visual images that provokes in its viewers a new form of reading. Haneke's film *Caché* (*Hidden*) initially appears to take the form of a classic mystery—an archetypal modernist genre—with all of the requisite ingredients: surveillance, anonymous packages,

a violent death caught on video tape, and a set up involving a film within a film—a couple is being filmed, yet there is someone filming this filming. The film's premises suggest to the viewer that the identity of the voyeur will be resolved by the end of the film. But the film never answers this question; the viewer has searched for clues, only to find that, by the end of the film, the "who dun it?" cannot be solved. The purpose of the film was not to find a solution through a close reading. Watching the film without the goal to solve the mystery produces an entirely different reading of the film. A second viewing of *Caché* draws attention to the formal language of the cameras: the filmmaker's pan versus the stillness of the voyeur's surveillance camera. Once one realizes that the film is not about the reading of codes and indices, then the viewer's way to read has to shift in this context: close reading is not useful. Rather than a narrative in which "truth"—the identity of the voyeur—is revealed, the film produces undecidability and remains unresolved. It is not about what happened but about the language of reading. While Bresson may be about close reading, Haneke is not.

Another of Haneke's films, *Code Unknown* challenges the idea of close reading by providing a set of clues or codes whose meaning is never revealed. The code remains unknown because the film is not asking the audience to solve it. The difference between Bresson and Haneke, both highly imaginative and creative filmmakers, is instructive for today. If Haneke's films suggest that there no longer an interest in close reading, is it possible that today's late moment suggests another mode of reading? In other words, does the mode of reading provoked by films such as *Caché* and *Code Unknown*—a reading that is not looking for clues, indices, or narrative, or any other aspect of the part-to-whole relationship—suggest another mode of reading architecture? Unlike previous manifestations of lateness—say late modernism—this particular moment in history is different.

This difference relates to the impact of the events of 1968, particularly the philosophic revolution known as deconstruction or poststructuralism, which occurred at that time. Among other issues that deconstruction questioned was the subtle but continuing influence of the metaphysical project, particularly the metaphysics of presence. Deconstruction aimed at the Hegelian dialectic

and the synthetic project of philosophy. Yet while philosophy could deconstruct presence, since it was only conceptual, Jacques Derrida claimed that in architecture, this was more problematic since architecture was concerned with actual presence. Architecture for many thinkers including Derrida was considered the locus of the metaphysics of presence. This was an axiom believed by both phenomenologists and conceptualists, two agencies of architects for whom the metaphysical project was up to that time not an issue. Architecture could not have conceived itself as the locus of the metaphysics of presence until poststructuralism and until philosophers such as Derrida raised the topic. Thus, today there is an awareness of architecture's implication in the metaphysical project, the persistencies of the part-to-whole relationship, the hegemony of vision, and the dialectical conditions of form/function, figure/ground, and subject/object.

It is important to note that the metaphysical project was responsible for bringing about the modern era in architecture, first, in the shift in the fifteenth century from a transcendental to an immanent metaphysic. Despite changing styles, from Renaissance to Baroque to Neo Classicism and despite paradigm shifts, the metaphysical project remained intact. This is partly due to the manner in which in these stylistic and paradigmatic shifts were located as an oppositional dialectic. The metaphysical project in each case was the engine of change.

Concerns that are central to architecture—material, tectonics, and dwelling—are rooted in the idea of place,



and of a truth in presence. If architecture's function is to place by providing not only a representation of presence, but a presence itself, then its major transgressive act is to displace place. In philosophy, a strategy of displacement is not physical or literal, but in architecture displacement cannot help but to engage physical material and site. But looking back on these changes in architecture, what strikes one is that they are by-and-large oppositional.

Architecture in this sense is a unique discipline, that in order to exist as such, it must undo or displace what it must place. No other discipline can make that specific claim. If transgression in architectural terms means displacing what needs to be placed, then this transgression is oppositional to prior architectural conventions, and therefore continues to operate dialectically. This was always the case in architecture, whether it was the displacement from a Renaissance façade to a Baroque façade, or the displacement of the ground floor with *pilotis* in the Modern Movement. In each of architectural history's prior moments of lateness, the metaphysics of presence returns as a concern of architecture: for example, despite Piranesi's dismantling of the part-to-whole relationship in his Campo Marzio, the figure of the whole returns strongly in the relationship of building to city in Le Corbusier, Kahn and Rowe. Acts of overcoming, displacing or transgressing the ideas of presence, place, being-in-place, and function all continue in a cycle of transgression, maintaining architecture within the metaphysical project. Moreover, all of the moments, from the moment of the avant-garde to the moment of the late-

ness, have in one way or another been characterized by these oppositional tendencies.

Despite the prevalent discourses of crisis in architecture, it is argued here that today presents a condition not of crisis but of lateness. Lateness in this sense is neither dialectical, nor oppositional, nor crisis-provoking in relationship to what has preceded it or what may come after it. Lateness is clearly not a project of the new. It is a moment of time that is conducive to strategies that are not oppositional. In this condition that is neither a new paradigm nor an opposition to an old paradigm, lateness provides a unique opportunity to examine the interiority of the architectural discipline and one of its major unthought conditions which is its metaphysics of presence. Today's period of lateness is the first to recognize that the metaphysical project is no longer necessarily a condition of certainty. This non-transgressive aspect of lateness does not need to engage or transgress the metaphysical project, that is, to repeat the cycles of history. If lateness offers a moment when the metaphysics of presence is not a central concern, this moment is one in which a possible strategy may emerge outside of the dialectical project.

