

**Paper for Primitive conference**  
15th – 18<sup>th</sup> September 2004

**Title: *Different Origins***

**Abstract**

Jacques Derrida, in *Of Grammatology*, addresses Rousseau's concept of the primitive outlined in the *Essay on the Origins of Language*. In place of Rousseau's classical derivation of language from the spoken word, Derrida famously proposes the *mark* or *trace* as a non-originary "origin". This in turn leaves any notion of the primitive as ready for a deconstructive reading; that is, it posits that any notion of "the primitive" is a constructed (ie non-primitive) idea with a history and political intent.

This paper will address to what extent does this theory of the mark and the questioning of the possibility of an origin present us with an essentially positive possibility of recasting architectural meaning outside a metaphysics which privileges the linguistic above certain of its "others", for instance, materiality.

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**The Paper Itself**

To begin. This is what we are doing, now, at the outset of this paper; and this beginning is the whole question. The question of the start, the origin, that which we think of as first, that from which other things are derived, that which we give ourselves as primary, as primitive.

For "the primitive" is always given, and more particularly is always something we give ourselves, more or less knowingly. And this gift – poison at the same time as present – as gift, destroys therefore the primitive as primitive, as origin. Double meaning of the words "the given": at once what we would like to think forms the basis, the ground, the fundament from which we spring; but in the same breath *saying* some event has occurred at this origin, that the origin gave itself or was given by some prior condition, was a choice, an action – in other words complex, that is, non-primitive.

This a-logic of the gift is deployed in Derrida's now classic text *Of Grammatology*, first in a theoretical matrix, and then put to the test in a reading of Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages*. Unlike some of Rousseau's better known works (for instance, *Discourse of the Origin of Inequality*) the *Essay on the Origin of Languages* puts forward a relatively straightforward thesis – one that can be traced forward from Vitruvius, to Warburton's *Divine Legation*, through Hobbes and Locke and thence via Condillac to Rousseau: the thesis that language and writing derive from the spoken word. *First* comes speech, itself derived from expressive animal cries and made possible in the Vitruvian account by the gathering of people around the fire; *then* comes writing, following on from speech, derived from it, a tool for extending speech's reach beyond the audible and acting as a prosthesis for memory. Writing, as a tool for artificial extension and as prosthesis for memory, is a phenomenon that *befalls* language in a moment of effectiveness which is also and at the same time a moment of *corruption*. The Platonic theme of the corruption of memory by writing in the introduction to the *Timaeus* is not far away.

To generalise this schema in terms of a theory of signs: spoken speech – here in the position of the primitive, that which is originary in this scenario – is the *Signified*, and writing comes as the *Signifier*, the sign, as that which does the signifying of the signified, of speech. In this classical

schema, which is the basic schema of Western metaphysics as a *logocentric* (that is: speech-and meaning-orientated) philosophical system, the signified has the place of the *primary*, the *primitive*, the *origin*, and the signifier is the derivation from that primitive beginning, that which befalls it or the cause of its fall into complexity and artificiality. Primitive, primary, signified; derived, artificial, secondary signifier. Relating to Rousseau's *Essay*, primary speech as that which has defined *man* in his humanity and which distinguishes him from the animal and its meaningless cries; followed by its sign, the written word, that which is added as a supplementary tool to language itself (ie speech), a tool which gives (logic of the gift here again) both positive possibilities *and* which poisons the original purity of speech and corrupts memory, making it lazy.

Now, as we know, what Derrida does is to question this structure of signified-signifier, speech and writing. Since, as Bertrand Russell notes somewhere, there is no way of ascertaining whether at the outset of "real" humanity speech did "in fact" precede writing; since the assertion that it did is precisely that, an assertion and no more; since the decision to make speech *primary*, to put speech in the place of the primitive, is a decision that is made on the basis of a certain not disinterested logic, then what of this interest? What if *our* interest is to question this logic, to reveal it as, precisely, interested, and reveal the nature of this interest?

Derrida does this by an apparent inversion. He proposes the *mark* or the *trace* as the primitive, as at the origin, in place of speech. He proposes, that is, he gives himself the thought that, he wagers for. This deconstructive move is more complex – indeed something other than – a mere inversion, however. He does not simply take the terms of the structure speech/writing and then invert them. What is being called into question in the deconstructive moment is the very order of the sign. For the mark, the trace, the scratch, is not taken to have a meaning. What is being proposed is *not* the substitution of one locus of meaning – namely speech – by another – namely writing as the bearer of meaning. That is why the term archi-writing is sometimes used. The figure of communication, of the transmission of meaning, is being inverted here at the same time. What is proposed is that the primary position of the *signified* be called into question. The trace or mark is *not* a bearer of meaning, but is rather the very possibility of the sign; the *signifier*, that which classically is thought to come *afterwards*, is given by Derrida the status of origin, of the primitive.

And thus the primitive, *per se*, is destroyed. We are given here *no substitute origin*. Or rather, the origin is a sort of non-originary origin, a bastard origin, always already complex, split, divided, non-pure – always already eventful.

With this, any notion of the primitive, of origins, is revealed as being a *constructed* idea, ie essentially non-primitive – with a history to it and as political intent. Notions of the primitive wish to present themselves as innocent, natural, unquestionable, clear, beyond debate; The deconstructive mode will always call this innocence into question, will always demand that it show its interest, relate to us its political intent. The "natural" acts, as Derrida says elsewhere, as a neutraliser, a force of neutralisation, a method of bringing us to the point of non-questioning, that is, to the point of the basis, the primary; and this force of neutralisation is something we should be wary of.

Is meaning an issue for architecture? Is there such as thing as architectural meaning, and does it necessarily operate as an effective regulating ideal for design or critique? If we take up Andrew Benjamin's recently articulated challenge to take Semper seriously when he says that to be a great artist, one must avoid or get beyond the issue of meaning; or if we are to take serious Peter Osborne's recent questioning of the apparent hegemony of a sort of "hermeneutical utilitarianism", as he called it – that is, the notion that, somehow, the more meaning we have the better it is for us; then does this land the architect or the critic in anything other than a realm where it appears that architectural design is nothing more – in essence- than the manipulation of form – the position that Benjamin appears to take. if architectural meaning is called into question as a just, ethical and proper concern of the architect, then can that leave us anywhere other than in an apparently sterile formalism?

The question seems inescapably framed in terms of a form/content or form/meaning dichotomy; that is, in terms of an overly literary and linguistic account of meaning. Meaning, as a concept – perhaps as *the concept* – is caught within the logocentric structure Rousseau outlined. For at least two reasons:

- the form/content or form/meaning structure which both defines meaning in its opposition to form and *is* meaning itself as the interrelationship between form and meaning, is the same structure operating in the same way as the signified/signifier, where the *form* of the sign (its signified/signifier structure) is opposed to its content or meaning (the signified side of that structure)
- to think *meaning* is always to think it on the basis of a notion of the *originary*, the *primitive*. Without the primitive, without that to which the movement of signs can be related back, the play of signs becomes un-stoppable or unstopped, manic, ungrounded, meaning less. Hence the concern of certain of our colleagues firstly to explicate the pre-modern chain of being where the actions and structure of the world in which we live was related back to an overarching relatively stable structure and from thence to the still point of a godhead; and then, acknowledging that this schema is no longer available, re-casting the structure and relating it back to a primary – that is, essentially primitive – reality of the Husserlian phenomenological life-world. Rykwert, for instance, in the last paragraph of his 1972 book *On Adam's House in Paradise*, does precisely this

It is the questioning of the ultimate validity of Husserl's concept of the life-world – that is, the questioning of the very premises (ie primary groundings of) phenomenology, which was Derrida's concern from his doctoral thesis on *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl's Philosophy* onwards. And this questioning occurs along the same lines as that within *Of Grammatology*'s deconstruction of Rousseau's notion of the primitive origins of writing and language – and this for *essential*, or let us say *structural* reasons. In placing Rousseau's signifier in place of the signified, what Derrida is doing, explicitly at times, is to throw down the gauntlet of the sign in front of Husserl's wager for the ultimate meaning, the ultimate reference – that of the life-world. For Rousseau's "speech" is in the same structural position of "the primitive", "the origin", as Husserl's phenomenological life-world, and in raising the signifier to the position of non-originary origin, Derrida is taking Husserl's crisis of signs, his crisis of representation, and treating it as the positive possibility of *any* discourse, any mark, any spacing, any work. For deconstruction, as a [positive endeavour (the *de* as in *desire, delight*) takes the crisis of signs – the fear, possibility and actual phenomenon of the signifier becoming detached from the signified original meaning and running off, as it were, of its own accord in a sort of madness away from the daylight of meaning - *a madness of the day* – and gives us the thought that, without this crisis, without the inherent possibility of this crisis, there would be no sign, no possibility of meaning, and that in instigating meaning and the primitive we can do nothing else but try to cover over the derived and constructed quality of these so-called, so-desired origins.

Thus Derrida will quote Husserl's *Ideas* back at him at the end of his essay *Speech and Phenomena*, saying:

Everything has, no doubt, begun in the following way:

A name on being mentioned reminds us of the Dresden gallery.... We wander through the rooms.... A painting by Teniers... represents a gallery of paintings... The paintings of this gallery would represent in turn paintings, which on their part exhibited readable inscriptions and so forth (*Ideas I*, #100; p293)

Certainly nothing has preceded this situation. Assuredly nothing will suspend it. It is not *comprehended*, as Husserl would want it, by intuitions or presentations. Of the broad daylight of presence, outside the gallery, no perception is given us or assuredly promised us. The gallery is the labyrinth which includes in itself its own exits: we have never come upon it as upon a particular case of experience – that which Husserl believes he is describing....

It remains, then, for us to *speak*, to make our voices *resonate* throughout the corridors.....

And contrary to what phenomenology..... has tried to make us believe, contrary to what our desire cannot fail to be tempted into believing, the thing itself always escapes.

And of course the thing itself is in the position of the ultimate primitive.

It is not happenstance that it is the architectural figure of the labyrinth which is evoked here; by Husserl as a special example of the crisis of signs which we are to avoid, of a *mise en abyme* where the relation back to the fixed point of the day-light of the life-world can be guaranteed; and by Derrida as the general situation in which we and architecture finds itself. Labyrinth as a sort of meaningless possibility of architecture, its possibility and a figure of it at the same time. For, to return to the *mark* or *trace* which is placed at the non-originary origin of language, this mark is not only the possibility of the sign or the elevation of the signifier over the signified, sign over meaning conventionally understood; this mark, one can argue, is spatial. In contrast to the timely presence and simultaneity of what I am caricaturing as "literary" or "linguistic" meaning – that is, the co-presence, at the same moment as the utterance of the sign, of the meaning of that sign – the mark as a non-reified primitive, as the possibility of the sign and of language, is a possibility that occurs as the spacing of space. The mark is not *essentially* spatial, because it works in differential fashion to give both space and time in an inherently complex moment of non-origin and thus operates beyond notions of essence – defined as that word is within the philosophical structures that the experience of the mark is intended to call into question. But one can say that the mark, the scratch, the trace, cannot occur without evoking space in a manner that evokes time in the same moment.

We might then claim that this mark, in the dance of the movement of its non-origin, will begin to allow us to think an architecture beyond meaning and beyond form.

Signed: Tim Gough

Date: now

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