

Within the strand of architectural theory which takes its orientation from Husserl's notion of the 'crisis of European science'¹, the position of baroque and rococo architecture takes on a particular significance. Carl states that the Baroque is "decidedly the last" of those "transcendent cultures... where a hierarchy of symbolic levels assures that everything has its place in a cosmology specific to the culture."² Vesely, in *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation*, claims that "the most significant change in the representation of reality took place in the period traditionally associated with the formation and development of modern science" and points out that this "transitional period overlaps... with...[the] 'Baroque'"³. Pérez-Gómez, in his book *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* states at the outset that "In fact, the malaise from which architecture suffers today can be traced to the collusion between architecture and its use of geometry and number as it developed in the early modern period"⁴ – that is, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The crisis these writers refer to is that characterised by Husserl at length in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, and summarised most succinctly perhaps in his short essay *The Origin of Geometry*⁵. The nature of the crisis is thus: every realm of human knowledge relates originally to the human life world, to the primordial conditions of human existence where, for instance, all geometric statements are related in the mind back to our concrete existence in a spatial world which gives those statements their meaning. The crisis occurs when the signs (algebra, diagrams, words) in which these statements occur begin to take on an existence in human affairs autonomous of their origins in primordial experience – a moment of *alienation* from *meaning*. As Husserl says:

...without the actually developed capacity for reactivating the original activities contained within its fundamental concepts, ie without the "what" and the "how" of its prescientific materials, geometry would be a tradition empty of meaning.... Unfortunately, however, this is our situation, and that of the whole modern age.⁶

This structure of this schema is translated directly across to architectural theory, whose crisis consists of an estrangement of architecture from the primordial conditions of its existence prompted by the disintegration of the aforementioned transcendent and unitary cultures of the baroque and pre-baroque under the onslaught of science. The result: an empty architectural formalism, according to this school of thought; and, in certain anglo-saxon fora, an ongoing battle in architectural theory, practice and above all teaching between said formalists⁷ and the hermeneuticians of meaning whom they appear to dispise.

The interpretation of baroque and rococo architecture is therefore contested ground not in the sense merely of an academic debate, but in a manner which influences some of the current practice and teaching of architecture.

¹ Including Dalibor Vesely; Alberto Pérez-Gómez; David Leatherbarrow; and to a certain extent Karsten Harries, Joseph Rykwert, Peter Carl

² Peter Carl, Preface to *Architecture and Continuity* (catalogue of the work of Dalibor Vesely and Mosen Mostafavi's unit at the AA), AA Pubs, London 1982, 5

³ Dalibor Vesely, *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation* (Cambridge, MA; MIT Press, 2004), 176

⁴ Alberto Pérez-Gómez

⁵ Notably translated into French originally by Jacques Derrida, whose extended 1962 introduction to the same marks the limit of his Husserlianism, before his decisive break into "deconstruction" later that decade

⁶ Edmund Husserl, "The Original of Geometry" in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* trans D Carr (Evanston, NUP, 1970), 366

⁷ Eisenman, Kwinter, Foreign Office Architects....

Because of Husserl's appeal to an original moment of meaning, where the relationship between the human realm of signs and what they signify is immediate and unproblematic, one theme which arises within the "crisis" school is that of the "primitive man" in the "traditional society", defined clearly by Agamben when he writes:

In a traditional system, culture exists only in the act of its transmission, that is, in the living act of its tradition.... In a mythico-traditional system, an absolute identity exists between the act of transmission and the thing transmitted...⁸

It is in comparison with the immediacy of cultural transmission that the crisis of modernity occurs, and the figure of the primitive man fully immersed in an unmediated reality appears implicitly in these accounts – for instance, in the opening pages of Leatherbarrow's *Uncommon Ground* where he is the counterpoint to Alberti's already proto-modern surveyor of theoretical distances in the mapping of Rome⁹.

This topos of the primitive man and of an unmediated traditional society is to be questioned. Marc Augé, in his *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*¹⁰ and in the context of anthropology, asks whether the notion of the primitive man and the associated society is not simply the answer to the need for an object of study, clear in its identity. All the more powerful in its call in that the need for an identifiable object of study is answered by means of a phenomenon characterised by identity and unity – Agamben's "absolute identity... between the act of transmission and the things transmitted". A recently published study of timekeeping¹¹ undermines the notion that "meaningful" measurements of time (ie those related to an immediate experience) were destroyed by the hegemony of mechanical clocks from the 17th century onwards: as a reviewer stated, the general lesson to be learnt is not to patronise the past, not to primitivise it.

This in turn means that a theoretical approach that tends to view the history of baroque and rococo architecture within a near-linear movement from such primitivism towards a time when culture is fully in crisis should be questioned. Karsten Harris in his *Bavarian Rococo Church*, while criticising Wittkower for denying Bernini's theatricality in comparison to rococo's "infection" by an overheated theatricality¹², nonetheless argues that "only eighteenth century did the tournament turn into a playful parody", thus reparsing the movement into its close cousin, that from the "serious" to the "comic" and non-serious¹³. As if we should take it for read that seriousness – together with the tradition – comes first in the human tradition. (We should perhaps hear Nietzsche's laugh as an antidote.)

For Vesely, the movement is characterised as a movement towards what he terms the mode of "introverted representation" where "the judgement of the individual spectator determines the visual experience"¹⁴, as he says in relation to the illusionism of

⁸ Giorgio Agamben *The Man without Content* trans G Albert (Stanford Ca, SUP, 1999), 107

⁹ David Leatherbarrow *Uncommon Ground* (Cambridge, MA; MIT Press, 2000), 10

¹⁰ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* trans...(), ?

¹¹ Paul Glennie and Nigel Thrift, *Shaping the Day : A History of Timekeeping in England and Wales 1300-1800* (Oxford OUP, 2009)

¹² Karsten Harris *The Bavarian Rococo Church* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1983), 122-3

¹³ the equation of the "serious" with the "primitive" remains unquestioned still in some anthropological studies

¹⁴ Dalibor Vesely, *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation* (Cambridge, MA; MIT Press, 2004), 184. The representation is introverted because it is judged by means

Bramante's choir at S Maria presso S Satiro. This contrasts to the earlier situation of "dialogue between the spectator and the picture"¹⁵. And for Vesely, it is the mediating role of light in the baroque, and the way in which this mediation differs from that of an earlier, medieval "microcosmic" world view¹⁶, which provides a key example. In a masterful examination of Guarini's Sacra Sindone he concludes that:

In Guarini's understanding, the medieval vision of light is replaced by a highly refined vision of the luminosity of ideas and the traditional perspective by a projective geometry of light. More generally, the luminosity of the phenomenal world is replaced by the luminosity of its geometrical representation¹⁷

Here, the "luminosity of the phenomenal world" is to be interpreted as a Husserlian phenomenology, that is as the "primitive" moment of meaningful engagement with the primordial reality of light; and what Guarini does, on the threshold of alienated modernity, is to replace this meaningful moment with the first step towards crisis, namely its representation in geometry. This representation is a step away from primordial reality, a step towards the European crisis of the sign.

This movement appears inexorable, but Vesely's analysis of the Marian symbolism of light in Zwiefalten intends to show southern German rococo as the last moment of a unified culture¹⁸, exemplified in a setting which is commonly interpreted – he claims - as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* but which rather gains its unity of painting, architecture, roccaille decoration and light from "a deeper unity that cannot be grasped through aesthetic experience". Here, in contrast to Guarini, the "infinity of divine ideas" is not expressed by means of geometry (as we know, rococo vaults differ from those of Guarini in following not a rigorous geometrical logic, but a more artisan method¹⁹) but rather is "played by the dialectics of word and image in rhetoric and its figures, primarily emblem and allegory", a play which can be driven only by "an idea that cannot be attained": this unattainable idea is that of the Christian notion of incarnation²⁰, which guarantees the deeper unity Vesely refers to.

of the individual; it is turned inwards; the individual becomes the measure of things. The implied historical movement: from *community* towards *individuality*.

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ *ibid*, 180

¹⁷ *ibid*, 204

¹⁸ "The unity of Baroque culture, sustained in many places – particularly in north Italy and in central Europe – through to the second half of the eighteenth century, was a relatively isolated phenomenon" *ibid*, 230

¹⁹ See Werner Mueller "The Authenticity of Guarini's Stereotomy in his *Architettura Civile*", *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* vol 27 No3 (Oct 1968), 203: "In those regions in which particularly sophisticated vaults were erected during the baroque period, namely, in Bohemia, Moravia, Franconia and Piedmont, the vaults were generally constructed of brick and quarried stone crudely hewn to an appropriate shape. In simple cases, the curves of intersection of two vaults are produced by the points of contact of the slabs." Mueller makes reference to Hans Reuther's article "Balthasar Neumanns Gewoeldebau" in *Das Muenster*, vi(1952), 57-65

²⁰ Vesely *op cit*, 220