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**Description**                      **Realism**                      **Detail**                      **in architectural historical writing**

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## introduction

Entering the architecture and language relationship we are confronted with a divergence: two opposing points of view consider language either as an integral part of architecture or simply as its accessory. In this dispute we will take the side of language accepting that architecture is an expanded system constituted not only out of the buildings themselves, but also their representation, their documentation through photographs or text, and their critical discourse.<sup>1</sup> From this rather general context we will read the relation between architecture and language through a very specific lens, that of description. This way, the immense field of studying the competitiveness or the complementarity of the two disciplines acquires a much clearer shape. The “pejorative” position of language in relation to architecture as it was formed in different moments in time, is reminiscent of the position of description that we encounter in architectural discourse - a position that we will try to lighten and preserve. Paradoxically, although description is an indispensable tool to the work of the architectural historian, it has been often taken for granted and its theoretical implications are usually overlooked. In our attempt to explore the importance of description and to unravel those reasons that are liable for its pejorative sense, we will follow a rather defending line.

Through our research into the notion of description in the space of literature, in arts or History<sup>2</sup> and before we see its applications in architectural history, a rather stable triangle of notions was formed. Description is discussed, almost with no exceptions, in relation to the notions of “realism” and “detail”. These three notions seem inextricably related, each one of them leading to the other two in a rather inevitable way. Our inquiry will approach them equally, revealing the unbreakable bonds of their relationship, aiming to see how they are defined and what their role is in architectural history.

In particular, we will approach description relating it to the complementary or oppositional notion of narration, as they appear together in the space of literature, and we will initially focus more on the description of pictures.

Before we attempt to answer the question of what could realism mean in architectural history, we will first descend into historical and literary realism. We will also attempt to

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<sup>1</sup> Adrian Forty, *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (Thames & Hudson, 2000) p.13.

<sup>2</sup> The preoccupation with the notion of description in this essay can be seen as the continuation of “The act of describing: Talking about things” -- a first attempt to explore the notion of description within the context of the module “Critical Methodologies of Architectural History” and under the supervision of Pr. Adrian Forty. (January 2005, MSc Architectural History)

approach the notion of “real”, a notion that mostly belongs to the field of psychoanalysis and see what kind of “realities” historians create through their narration of architecture.

In our discussion of the detail, the third apex of the triangle, we will focus more on Roland Barthes’ “useless detail”, and on the “new realism” created by Alain Robbe-Grillet and the *nouveau roman* where the notion of detail plays a structural role. The supposed superficial detailed description of the appearance of things will have a chance to defend its case.

Description is that notion that lingers between language and vision. It is the translation of image to words; in architecture, the translation of space to words. And if in every translation, like in every act of communication, there is a certain loss, it is worth seeing what is “lost in translation” in the case of description, and perhaps, what is gained also.

Vision and the way we see have their own history. If the history of architecture is connected to the “history of vision”,<sup>3</sup> one wonders about the inevitability of a *history of description* in architectural history as the result of the changes in the way we see; a history of how the object and the act of description change through time.

In the case of literature, the question of a history of description appears easier to answer. The passage from the eighteenth century novel (Le Sage, Voltaire) to the nineteenth century realism of Balzac and Flaubert and then to modernity and the *nouveau roman*, was marked by shifts where the role of description was structural.<sup>4</sup> We will not try here to imply equivalent shifts in the history of architecture.

Far from the vast venture of searching for a coherent history of description in architecture, we could see, through some leaps through time, equivalent differences from the passage from realism to modernism and then to after-the-modern, stopping at historians such as Ruskin, Pevsner and Reyner Banham. They are, moreover, three historians each of whom has studied the other, the last two connected in a teacher-student relationship, friendship or strong

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<sup>3</sup> Forty, *Words and Buildings* p.154, 159.

The relation between architecture and vision can be read in relation to the more general one between form and perception, a relation that goes back to Kant: Form is no longer a property of things, but exclusively of seeing them. It is the same attitude towards form that we also see in Wölfflin: “He acknowledged that if “form” belongs primarily to the viewer’s perception, then historical changes in architecture are to be understood in terms of changes in the mode of vision. “Vision has its history as well as architecture”.

<sup>4</sup> Georg Lukacs, “Narrate or Describe”, in *Writer and Critic and other essays*, ed. and trans. by Arthur D.Kahn (Merlin Press 1970) p.116.

dissents. They also represent three distinct generations in the landscape of architectural history and they are sufficiently different or opposing enough, so as to open up many issues. In these three examples, Ruskin will help in exploring how his deeply personal way of writing has been affected or not, by the emergence of realism in literature that occurred about the same period with his work. Pevsner will mostly be an example for exploring description and the limitations of language in modernist architectural writing and Reyner Banham will help to demonstrate our argument about the role of description and detail in the emergence of the “real” in architectural history.

Furthermore, Ruskin, Pevsner and Banham were historians who were all deeply engaged with writing; we could consider them as *writers*. By reading their texts we will try to read history as literature; we will approach architectural texts as literature texts in search of their descriptive or narrative parts, nearly in terms of a literary critique. Our reading will be through the microscope of words, searching for the verbs of narration and the adjectives of description that determine the disposition of the texts.

## 1. Description

### 1.1.1 description vs narration: definitions in “the space of literature”

*“Every narrative includes two types of representation, although they are blended together and always in varying proportions: representation of actions and events, which constitute the ‘narration’ and representation of objects or people, which make up the act of what we today call ‘description’ ”.*<sup>5</sup>

In Gerard Genette’s article “The Boundaries of Narrative”, we find a balanced account of the relation between the two notions of narration and description. There is a paradox, though, that stamps this relationship. Narration, unlike description, cannot be conceived independently; there is no verb “totally free of descriptive implication”. As Genette notes “objects can exist without movement but not movement without objects”.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, description is usually thought of as the “handmaiden of the narration”; always necessary, always submissive but never emancipated from the “tyranny of narrative”.<sup>7</sup> According to Genette, description’s function is reduced either to a decorative, purely aesthetic role, being, thus, a *pause* in the flow of the narrative, or to an explanatory and symbolic role.

This reference to Genette’s article, apart from introducing us to the definitions of description and narration in the space of literary theory, is also important because of the way description and narration are entangled with the notions of space and time, as well as with the “simultaneous” and the “successive”, respectively. As Genette explains, narration, by the *temporal succession* of its discourse, is linked to actions or events, putting emphasis on the temporal and the dramatic aspects of narrative. Description, on the other hand, represents objects solely in their spatial existence outside of any temporal dimension; it represents objects *simultaneously juxtaposed in space*, suspending the flow of time and spreading out the narrative in space.

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<sup>5</sup> Gerard Genette, “Boundaries of Narrative” in *Readers and Spectators: Some views and reviews* (New Literary History, vol.8 No1, Autumn, 1976) p.1.

Because “narrative” and “narration” are used interchangeably in English, Ann Levonas who translated the article in English, indicates the difference between the French terms *recit* and *narration*: the one meaning the story, that which is narrated, and the other meaning the act of or process of narrating.

<sup>6</sup> Genette, “Boundaries of Narrative” p.6.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.6.

### 1.1.2 descriptive-narrative

*“It is in the nature of language that words have to be spoken or written in a linear sequence. A drawing on the other hand presents its image at once. In this respect, buildings are more like language than they are like drawings, for they cannot be experienced all at once – they have to be explored by moving through and around them in a sequence”*<sup>8</sup>

We could take the pair of description and narration a small step further if we stretch their meaning to reach their derivatives “descriptive” and “narrative”. By doing this, the adjectives “descriptive” and “narrative” except from referring to parts of a text, they can be used so that to characterize genres of art or even a whole discipline.<sup>9</sup> Taking into account Genette’s definitions and relations with space and time, we could argue that language is narrative by nature and painting is descriptive by nature -an art of space not time. A question ensuing, then, is where does architecture, being an art of both space and time stand; when does time prevail on space or the vice versa.

In the passage quoted above, language and architecture seem to match narration more than description, since we schematically accepted that it is narration that is directly related to temporal succession. We could then argue that architecture is a narrative art; it has “to be explored by moving through and around in a sequence”. When referring, though, to the description-narration dipole and its relation to architecture, we should be rather cautious. In this essay, we are more interested in exploring the difference between “describe and narrate” as it occurs in written texts, in architectural history or criticism. Thus, despite the

<sup>8</sup> Forty, *Words and Buildings* p.39.

Related to this distinction between language and drawings, we can read W.J.T.Mitchell’s distinction between language and images: “Language unfolds in temporal succession; Images reside in a realm of timeless spatiality and simultaneity”. This distinction, being a very old one, goes back to G.E.Lessing who in his “Essay upon the limits of Poetry and Painting” (1766) distinguished literary and plastic art, poetry being engaged with the succession of time and painting with space.

W.J.T.Mitchell, “Introduction” in *The Language of Images* ed. W.J.T.Mitchell (University of Chicago Press, 1974) p.3. and,

W.J.T.Mitchell, “Space and Time: Lessing’s Laocoon and the politics of genre” in *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (University of Chicago Press, 1986) p.95.

<sup>9</sup> This application of the descriptive narrative dipole to genres of art is an idea borrowed from Svetlana Alpers and her article “Describe or Narrate”. Alpers uses the term “descriptive” to characterize 17<sup>th</sup>c. Dutch painting (portraits, still lives, landscapes) and “narrative” to talk about Renaissance art (that represented human *actions*). Her article title is borrowed from Georg Lukacs’s “Narrate or Describe” but doesn’t follow Lukacs’s rigorous criticism of description.

Svetlana Alpers, “Describe or Narrate? A problem in Realistic Representation” in *Readers and Spectators: Some views and reviews* (New Literary History, vol.8 No1, Autumn, 1976).



fact that architecture could be defined as a narrative art, the way we write about it employs both descriptive and narrative elements. The object of description in different architectural history texts and the way description and narration complement one another will be our main concern. The dilemma of whether “we describe or narrate space” however important, is rather schematic or simplistic, as most dilemmas or oppositions are.

## 1.2. *Bildbeschreibung* (description of a picture)

Before we enter the more complicated space of architecture, we might look at some interesting ideas concerning the object of description in painting and pictures in general. Michael Baxandall in his book *Patterns of Intention: On Historical Explanation of Pictures* analyzes the way we talk about pictures and relates description to “explanation”. For Baxandall, “every evolved explanation of a picture includes or implies an elaborate description of that picture”. Description and explanation, thus, define one another, with description being the “mediating object of explanation”.<sup>10</sup>

The act of describing is also distinguished from that of *looking at* a picture: description cannot reproduce the act of looking; it cannot deal with the simultaneously available field that opens up in front of us in a picture. That is, language is also presented in Baxandall’s work as a temporally linear medium. Furthermore, if we consider the reverse procedure of reproducing a picture out of a verbal description –however exact and meticulous- we know that the result can never be close to the original picture. This leads Baxandall to speak of language as a “generalizing tool”,<sup>11</sup> not very well equipped to reconstruct a particular picture.

After all, for Baxandall, a “perfect” representation of a picture is not even description’s ultimate purpose. Paradoxically, the words and concepts one may use when describing, are not “in any normal sense descriptive”.<sup>12</sup> What one offers in a description is a representation of *thinking about* a picture more than a representation of the picture itself. And this is a process that *follows* the act of looking. Through description, Baxandall argues, we are trying to locate the sort of *interest* the picture has for us, an interest that it would be hard to

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On Historical Explanation of Pictures* (Yale University Press, 1985) p.1.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8.

express if we confined ourselves to terms directly bound up with the physical object of description. Baxandall, in general, discusses description in such a way that it is directly related to personal choices, personal expression, explanation, *intention*; a way that is widely different from a rather “innocent” description that we will later see.

Heiner Müller’s *Bildbeschreibung*<sup>13</sup>

(description of a picture) is a rather appropriate example for us to see how the questions discussed in Baxandall’s work are applied in a specific text. Müller’s description, belonging to the space of literature, is like a whirl that has been formed taking as a start a few fixed points of a picture. It starts with precision, fidelity to an image that we do not see and gradually culminates, turning itself into a *story*, a number of stories, in a text without full stops, just commas, not even a full stop at its very end. The question of “what do we see” remains lingering answered. The original picture is just a pretext for a new series of pictures, the one following the other, the one refuting the one that precedes it, before the beholder’s eyes that not only sees, but remembers, imagines, creates with words a new story.

“Objectivity” of description is not the issue in question here. We are dealing with sheer interpretation. The only moment that the reader is landed on the picture itself is when Müller’s description literally stumbles and stops on the edge of the picture, on its frame that conceals the rest of the story. Müller’s reference to his work as the “explosion of a memory”, like a second title, stresses the “dream structure” of the text. We can retrace here the psychoanalytic procedure of extracting from the “speechless surface of the image its hidden verbal message”.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, Müller when talking about his work, admits that “the picture” was an existing painting by a student that drew like an amateur and therefore “many things were somehow *wrong* in the picture”.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Heiner Müller, *Bildbeschreibung* translated in Greek by Natasa Siuzouli (Odos Panos, 2000). English translation: *Explosion of a memory* edited and translated by Carl Weber (New York: PAJ, 1989).

<sup>14</sup> Florian Vassen, “Images become Texts become Images: Heiner Müller’s *Bildbeschreibung* (Description of a Picture)” in *Heiner Müller: Contexts and History* ed. Gerhard Fischer (Stauffenburg Verlag, 1994) p.169.

<sup>15</sup> Heiner Müller quoted in Vassen, “Images become Texts become Images” p.184 (my Italics).

*“Naturally, by this lack of perfection, spaces emerged which would have been covered by perfect drawing or painting. There were fissures in the picture which revealed an aspect of the portrayed which otherwise would not have been visible, which otherwise would have been concealed”.*<sup>16</sup>

The faith in the “lack of perfection” and the suspicion towards “perfect” representation, precision or verisimilitude should not surprise us when we are dealing with descriptions. This detail in the backstage of the story, is something we should keep in mind so that to relate it later to Robbe-Grillet’s little details that “ring false” and which allow, like Müller’s “fissures in the picture”, the appearance of “reality”.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.184.

<sup>17</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, “From Realism to Reality” in *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction* (trans. Richard Howard (Northwestern University Press, 1989) p.163.

## 2. Realism

### 2.1 historical realism

Moving onward to the notion of realism, we notice that different disciplines have all made claim to it, giving it a different definition each time. In this essay, literary, pictorial and historical realism, are entangled and so the task is to see what all these different “realisms” lend to description and realism in architectural history.

The first analogy we will venture will be that between History and architectural history.<sup>18</sup> If the subject matter of History is the “past”, in our case it is space, architecture. Of course, space and buildings are not themselves history. It is only how they were in the past and how we recover the experiences people had of them in the past, that is history. But architectural history’s role is not confined to talking about this forgotten past. Buildings live through time and however old they are, they come to the fore through living in them and writing about them in different moments in time. There is, thus, a difficulty in the narration of the history of past events –we could already speak of a “narrative” as we will more analytically see next- in comparison to a narrative of architecture. Space itself, as an important part of the historical research remains in the present, and could still be experienced at first hand. And as Michael Baxandall notes, art criticism and art history are directly determined by whether their object is present, “available really or in reproduction”.<sup>19</sup>

What we are suggesting in this analogy though, is that if in the case of History this bygone “past” is constantly eluding us, in our case, what escapes, resists framing, is space and the intangible experience of space. Thus, the question of “realism” in architectural history cannot mean the same thing. We are not referring to a realism in search of a “historical truth”, but more, to a realism through which the mystery of space unfolds; we could rush to call it the “real” of space, without defining it yet. We’ll be exploring the historians’ language, the language of description, and we’ll be looking for what could this “real” mean in different moments in time. That is, we will end up closer to a literary realism.

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<sup>18</sup> Taking History as a broader discipline –science, we accept it written with a capital “H” and we leave “history of architecture” written with small letters just to show that it is part of this broad sense of History.

<sup>19</sup> Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* p.9.

Entering the space of historical realism, we can see that description plays a central role and it is worth seeing the context within which it is placed among the different schools and tendencies in the discipline of History. Through a series of articles “for and against” historical realism, we will focus more on “Defending Historical Realism”, an article by Adrian Kuzminski,<sup>20</sup> because of the way it presents the notion of description and because his defence shares some points with ours. Furthermore, the fact that very early in his text the defence of realism, as stated in the title, switches to a defence of description, reveals the unbreakable bonds of their relationship.

What is interesting in Kuzminski’s article is that he places description in a non-theoretical context, dissociated from contemporary interpretative and explanatory tendencies. And it is worth seeing whether and to what extent there could be such an “innocence” of description. Kuzminski makes a schematic division between realist and “ironist” historians in which description surely is by the side of the realists. What is striking is that description is discussed as an inherently non-theoretical activity that claims a “self-evident autonomy”.<sup>21</sup> It is somehow hard to easily accept a position as such and this simple, or even simplistic, division today that explanation and interpretation predominate.

According to Kuzminski, the realists are not trying to explain or interpret anything. “All a description has to do is describe, if only briefly or roughly, to be a legitimate description”.<sup>22</sup> The deeper sense of things, as the realists believe, is self-contained and revealed through description. They base their confidence on the primitive, unmediated, non-theoretical power of evidence to testify, although this confidence has many reasons to stumble.<sup>23</sup> After years of criticism of positivism and empiricism it seems strange to return back to the Rankean dictum, to a position that trusts the mere description of empirical items. For the “ironists”, on the other hand, the question of “what really happened” becomes irrelevant,

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<sup>20</sup> Adrian Kuzminski. “Defending Historical Realism” in *History and Theory* vol.18, no.3. Oct., 1979 p.316-349.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.316.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.336.

<sup>23</sup> This confidence in the representation of facts that are attested by documentary evidence, reminds us of Ranke’s historicism. His realistic approach of history that developed about at the same years as literary realism, in the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> c., shares also with it the adherence to the particular and the detail. As Ranke has written in 1860’s: “the study of particulars, even of a single detail, has its value, if it is done well...”  
Hayden White, “Ranke: Historical Realism as Comedy” in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) p.165.

even meaningless. They deny the self-evidence of facts, claiming that “there is always room for *intention* to intervene”,<sup>24</sup> especially if there are gaps in the evidence to be bridged.

Kuzminski’s analysis, even though he doesn’t explicitly refer to it, leads us to the Annales school, as it is thoroughly presented by François Dosse in his book “L’histoire en miettes” (History in Crumbs). The Annales school, according to Dosse, in its third phase as shaped in 1970’s, had noticeably departed from the “global history” of Lucien Febvre and Fernand Braudel.<sup>25</sup> This change was combined with the emergence of a neo-positivism, charmed by the “stark fact”.<sup>26</sup> This reappearance of an empirical criticism in the middle 70’s, is in contradiction with the Annales first position of 1929 that was opposed to this same positivistic school. As a result, in the last generation of the Annales, historical writing becomes more descriptive than explanatory, more positivistic and empirical than scientific, a return that could justify Kuzminski’s defense of historical realism written in 1979.

What we should keep from this defence is its interpretation as non-theoretical, non-philosophical, so that to compare it later to Robbe-Grillet’s and *nouveau roman*’s new literary realism, where there is also a comparable attempt to release description from meaning and signification. In a similar way, we will see how “the residual presence”<sup>27</sup> of the past, or what Kuzminski calls the “presently existing past”, is reminiscent of Roland Barthes’ details as “irreducible residues” of narratives that also attest to the “real”.<sup>28</sup>

### 2.2.1 History as narrative

Description in architectural

history seems to hover between historical realism (it is preoccupied with a historical object that has existed in the past or still exists), and literary realism (we are dealing with a written text that attempts “*exercices in style*”).

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<sup>24</sup> Kuzminski, “Defending Historical Realism” p.337 (my Italics).

<sup>25</sup> François Dosse, *L’Histoire en Miettes: Des “Annales” à la “nouvelle histoire”* translated in Greek by Aggeliki Vlahopoulou (Crete University Press, 1998) p.196.  
English translation: *New History in France: The Triumph of the Annales* translated by Peter V. Conroy, Jr. (University of Illinois Press, 1994)

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.204 (my translation).

<sup>27</sup> Fernand Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life 1400-1800* (New York, 1974) p.441, quoted in Kuzminski, “Defending Historical Realism” p.344.

<sup>28</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Reality Effect” in *The Rustle of Language* trans. Richard Howard (University of California Press 1989) p.146.

The term “History” is itself ambivalent, as it has both the meaning of what has really happened and of narrating these events.<sup>29</sup> Reading History –and consequently architectural history- as a narrative, is not a novelty. Paul Ricoeur in his text *La Fonction Narrative* (The Narrative Function) advocates the deconstruction of the asymmetry between “real narrative” (History) and fictional narrative. He says: “The road to History as a literary *artefact* has opened”.<sup>30</sup> By this, we do not imply any troublesome relation between History and fiction. There are certain things about History’s verifiable evidence that sets it apart from literature. When we refer to “History as narrative” we are adopting Ricoeur’s position that History and narrative are sharing two important aspects. The first and most significant of them is the notion of the “plot”. The other is our ability to follow the unfolding of a story-whether real or fictitious.

The notion of “plot” -a notion very crucial to Ricoeur’s work- constitutes the common aspect of every narrative.<sup>31</sup> An expansion towards the analysis of the plot cannot be realized within the constraints of this essay. It can be borrowed though, as a very interesting tool so that to see how it can be adjusted when applied to architectural history texts. It is interesting to see how the more “secluded descriptions” as distinct episodes, are affected, transformed, by this subsumption and arrangement within a plot, their “*emplotment*”.<sup>32</sup> Our reading of Pevsner, will give us the chance to come back to the notions of “plot” and “*emplotment*” so that to have a more specific view on them.

Ricoeur, referring to a series of works that have dealt with History in relationship to fiction and with historians as writers, is assured that History is “writing”.<sup>33</sup> Again we should be

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<sup>29</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *La Fonction Narrative* translated in Greek by Vaggelis Athanasopoulos (Kardamitsa, 1990) p.55.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p.59 (my translation).

According to Ricoeur, this decisive step took place when theories such as structuralism, symbolism deriving from literary criticism and especially from the semiotics of narrative, were applied to the discipline of History.

<sup>31</sup> Ricoeur defines and supports the notion of “plot” especially in comparison to “structure”, a structuralist term towards which he is very critical. The way plot is different from structure is a result of the way the two notions are related to time: while structure is “atemporal”, a “two-dimensional” expression of relations, plot is directly connected to time, the act of following a narrative and the succession of the episodes. Ricoeur is generally trying to replace plot’s supremacy over structure, opposing French structuralism. Ricoeur, *La Fonction Narrative* p.31.

<sup>32</sup> “Emplotment” is a notion borrowed from Northrop Frye that Hayden White uses centrally in his work. Ibid., p.62.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p.65.

careful with such aphorisms. When Ricoeur discusses History both, as a “literary *artefact*” and as a representation of reality, since it depicts “real events in the real world”,<sup>34</sup> we should be clear about those aspects that allow us the rather dangerous characterization of “literary *artefact*”. Apart from plot and *emplotment*, we will read architectural history texts, in search of their literary qualities, that is, the special uses of language, the personal quests of the historians-writers in the territory of words, syntax and grammar. We will further argue that it is exactly through these literary qualities, through language and the *details* of words that those openings are created that may allow the emergence of “reality”, of the “real”.

### 2.2.2 literary realism

Charles Baudelaire once made the following statement: “a good poet is always a realist”.<sup>35</sup> This phrase, though, however impressive, cannot elucidate the complexity that the notion of realism acquired the years that followed. It is a phrase written in 1855, when realism, a philosophical term since Medieval times, was entering the space of literary criticism and theory, as a result of Gustave Courbet’s painting exhibition with the well known title “Realism”. Besides, it is a rather ambiguous phrase that is worth further discussion.

In literature, the problem of realism could be read as a “sub-question” of the problem of reality. It is a way so that the immense, inaccessible, literature-reality relationship, is confined through the prism of realism as a literary genre. As Wolfgang Preisendanz accurately notes in his book “Wege des Realismus” (Ways of Realism), the way that we demand “reality” from literature really matters: it is one thing to ask from literature the representation of an existing reality and quite another to expect from literature the creation of its own reality. The problem of the reality *of* literature is different from the problem of reality *in* literature.<sup>36</sup>

The Oxford Dictionary entry for the word realism is hardly reassuring:

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p.65.

<sup>35</sup> Wolfgang Preisendanz, *Wege des Realismus* translated in Greek by Anna Hrysogelou-Katsi (Kardamitsa, 1990) p.84.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.80.



*“Close resemblance to what is real; fidelity of representation, rendering the precise details of the real thing or scene”.*<sup>37</sup>

Despite the fact that it reveals for once more, the unbreakable relationship between realism and detail, it leaves us with some unanswered questions. It is not further defined what is that which has the legal right to be considered as real. As Bertolt Brecht would say, realism is more defined through the relationship between the artwork and its audience: “One person’s realism is another’s fantasy”.<sup>38</sup> So, neither reality, nor realism is something obvious. And this is not only because reality means different things for each one, but also, because through art or language, things are given to us through a certain viewpoint, intervened, composed, distorted, since language selects, points and disappoints.<sup>39</sup>

The question that emerges thus, is what are the “realities” created by the narration of architectural history; how do historians conceive “reality” and how do they try to communicate it; how much place there is for a personal interpretation of it.

The reading of Ruskin that follows is an attempt to read Ruskin-the historian as a writer. We will focus on his syntax, his way of narrating architecture, on the aspects of space he chooses to talk about in relation to other literary works. Ruskin’s work developed around the same period with the emergence and growth of realism in literature, and it is interesting to see how it is affected by it and how at points it can surpass it, anticipating other literary genres that are to follow.

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<sup>37</sup> Oxford English Dictionary. entry: “realism”  
[http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50198434?single=1&query\\_type=word&queryword=realism&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50198434?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=realism&first=1&max_to_show=10)

<sup>38</sup> Terry Eagleton, “Pork Chops and Pineapples. A review of ‘Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature’ by Erich Auerbach” in *London Review of Books* vol.25 no.20 23 Oct. 2003

<sup>39</sup> Yiagos Andreadis, “Introduction” in Honoré de Balzac, *Illusions Perdues* translated in Greek by Kostas Sfikas (Stahy, 2000) p.86.

### 3. Ruskin: St. Mark's

Ruskin's description of St. Mark's from *The Stones of Venice* is an example rather rich in experiments with writing. It manages to communicate a certain sense of Venice and St. Mark's, though, in a rather paradoxical manner, since the conventional ways of describing space have been deserted.

The subject Ruskin addresses is the "reader", the "voyager", the "stroller". Ruskin's voice, the "I" of the narrative, recedes to the background of reading, guiding us, giving us directions, almost hypnotizing us. Like the instructions of a magician juggling, practicing his tricks, Ruskin transfers us here and there, to Venice and to the North, his own North that is always a point of reference.

Ruskin's text starts with an allusion to St. Mark's history, which is more a reference to the history of the city's life, its myths and legends in relation to the building, than a history of architecture of the building itself. There is a point, though, where his telling of the story and architectural history coincide: the mosaics on the church's walls are those elements of the building, an architectural detail that recounts its tale and at the same time verifies historical facts and chronological orders, being what Ruskin calls "picture history".<sup>40</sup>

*"The fast and the discovery of the coffin (of the Evangelist), by whatever means effected, are facts; and they are recorded in one of the best preserved mosaics of the north transept."*<sup>41</sup>

Ruskin, by choosing to describe the mosaics of the church, creates a picture within a picture, a building, the one eight hundred years ago, within the current one. And after this excursion to the past is completed, the writer-guide-magician takes us from St. Mark's in Venice, to a quiet English cathedral town.

#### 3.1.1 Ruskin's grammar and syntax

The description that follows is what Ruskin uses as his magic tool to transfer us to this new reality. He has rallied all the grammatical and syntactic rules to accomplish his goal: Sentences become surprisingly long, the choice of words, one by one, build the new picture down to its minutest detail. The conjunction "and", excessively used, gives a frenzy rhythm. Sentences are replete of metaphors, "as if"s and "seems to"s. The future tense –the

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<sup>40</sup> John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, Library Edition vol.X ed.E.T.Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, (London: George Allen, 1904). §8 p.76.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., §8 p.76.

future tense of hypnotizing- this unjustified certainty “we will go along the straight walk, we will push fast through” and also the exhortative “let us imagine, let us let go together” or the imperative “think, estimate, weigh”<sup>42</sup> manage to carry us away. And furthermore, the semi-colon, mostly the semi-colon, gives to Ruskin’s writing an agitative quality.

“...*diminutive and excessively trim houses, with little oriel and bay windows, jutting out here and there, and deep wooden cornices and eaves painted cream colour and white, and small porches to their doors...*”<sup>43</sup>

### 3.1.2 the magic charm of the semi-colon

It would be interesting here to pause for a moment and refer to the “magic charm of the semi-colon”, to use George Moore’s words when he pointed out a literary work, not great in length and rather unknown, but bearing an important history. Edouard Dujardin’s *The Bays Are Sere*<sup>44</sup> is a work written in 1887, that has notably affected the history of literature and that concerns us to the extent that it introduces the notion of the “*monologue intérieur*”,<sup>45</sup> a manner of writing that Ruskin seems to touch at some points in a text that, otherwise, is an architectural history text.

But what is the “*monologue intérieur*”? It is the “transition from reverie to writing”.<sup>46</sup> Sentences at times unconnected; continual flow of images and emotions. Writing becomes fragmentary, phrases are connected with an infinitude of semi-colons. Syntax might be

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., §11 p.80.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., §10 p.78-79.

<sup>44</sup> Edouard Dujardin, *Les lauriers sont coupés* translated in Greek by Mihalis Arvanitis (Nissides, 2001) Dujardin met Mallarmé in Paris in 1884 and, being particularly influenced by him and the other symbolists of that era, he created the journal “*Révue Wagnérienne*” where, in 1887, he published *Les lauriers sont coupés* in four installments. The next year it was also published as a book. This book was to be discovered by James Joyce in a kiosk in Paris, in 1903. Joyce bought the book and as he confessed to his French translator Valéry Larbaud, it worked as his inspiration for the writing of *Ulysses*-despite, of course, the sensible differences between the two works.

<sup>45</sup> Gleb Struve commenting on the English translations of the term “*monologue intérieur*”, uses “inner monologue” as a more accurate rendering comparing it to “internal monologue” or the even worse “interior monologue”. Gleb Struve, “*Monologue Intérieur: The Origins of the Formula and the First Statement of Its Possibilities*” *PMLA* vol.69 no.5 (Dec., 1954) p.1101.

<sup>46</sup> Mihalis Arvanitis, “*Monologue Intérieur: Confession of the Inmost*” in Edouard Dujardin, *Les lauriers sont coupés* p.96.

disrupted and speech becomes poetic. Thoughts seem to derive from the unconscious with an entirely inner process, expressed with sentences that give the impression that they have just been uttered, extracted from the writer's mind.

Far from implying here that Ruskin has been influenced by a series of writers whose life and work, moreover, followed his own and who are directly connected to literary modernism (Mallarmé, Dujardin, Joyce), what is worth keeping are the literary qualities of Ruskin's text. His experimentations in writing come as a surprise given that they are applied in genres of discourse which one would not expect to find them.

The return-landing to Venice is equally abrupt as the flight to the English cathedral town. This reference to the English topography is not surprising. The comparison and Ruskin's predilection for the continental "largeness and age" as opposed to the English "marvellous smallness both of houses and scenery" is something apparent at several points of his work. What *is* surprising, though, is the way he talks about the English language itself. Characterizations such as "ridiculous in its mincing of the vowels"<sup>47</sup> astonish us when they come from someone whose writing seems as a delightful act with an impetuous, almost poetic, use of words.

### 3.2.1 from French to British realism

The approach to St. Mark's is gradual through the streets and the plaza nearby. The detailed description of the street, of the shops on both sides of the street, of their materials and condition depending on the financial position of their owner, through an association of thoughts leads us to literary realism. The exhaustive descriptions of French realist novelists that undertook the role of displaying and stressing social conditions, social roles and stereotypes, seem to be reproduced in Ruskin's writing:

*"On each side, a row of shops, as densely set as may be, occupying, in fact, intervals between the square stone shafts, about eight feet high, which carry the first floors: intervals of which one is narrow and serves as a door; the other is, in the more respectable shops, wainscoted to the height of the counter and glazed above, but in those of the poorer tradesmen left open to the ground..."*<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Kristine Ottesen Garrigan, "The Ultimate Significance of Ruskin's Architectural Writings: An Index to his Mind" in *Ruskin on Architecture: His Thought and Influence* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1973) p.171.

<sup>48</sup> Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice* §12 p.80-81.

French realism has typically been understood as the source and exemplar of all nineteenth century realisms, with British realism characterized as a latecomer, or imitator of the French model. Caroline Levine in her work on Victorian Realism discusses the particularities that realism gained when adopted by Britain and furthermore how it is specifically adapted in Ruskin's work.<sup>49</sup> A closer study of the Ruskinian realism reveals other interesting aspects that are not confined to literary realism. In 1870's Ruskin was being seen as the father of realism and the *Oxford English Dictionary* credited him with its invention,<sup>50</sup> but Ruskinian realism seems a more complex project. His involvement with it, as it is articulated in *Modern Painters*, is associated more with arts than with literature, but it would be interesting to allude to some points of his theory.

The Victorian uses of the word "realism" referred to a critical aesthetic project. *Modern Painters* can be read as a radical attack on art tradition where realism was a form of a cultural critique. It was a critique of the representational methods and particularly of mimesis-imitation, what Caroline Levine refers to as the "the critique of *trompe l'oeil*".<sup>51</sup> Far from emphasizing on the visual accuracy, Ruskin's realism insists on the inadequacies of representation and differentiates itself from the "cleverly life-like trick" of verisimilitude. It emerges as a sceptical method, a struggle to apprehend the hidden truths of the world. As Caroline Levine notes, Victorian realism "is an attempt to use language to get at a reality beyond language-whether to a prior, unmediated experience of the world or to materiality itself".<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> French realism has seemed clear and coherent, while British realism has emerged as more inchoate and plural, resisting both a consensual definition and a common canon of examples. Caroline Levine, "Ruskin's Radical Realism" in *The Pleasures of Suspense: Victorian Realism and Narrative Doubt*, (University of Virginia Press, 2003) p.10.

René Wellek also argues that although there were Victorian fictions that one could call realistic, "there was no realistic movement of that name before George Moore and George Gissing, late in the eighties." René Wellek, "The Concept of Realism in Literary Scholarship" in *Concepts of Criticism* (Yale University Press, 1963) p.229.

<sup>50</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary* cites the 4<sup>th</sup> volume of the *Modern Painters*, published in April 1856, as the earliest instance of the word "realism" that, as we've seen is defined as "fidelity of representation, rendering the precise detail of the real thing". Levine, *The Pleasures of Suspense: Victorian Realism and Narrative Doubt* p.204.

<sup>51</sup> Caroline Levine, "Ruskin's Dreaded *Trompe l'oeil*" in *The Journal of Aesthetic and Art Criticism* vol.56 no.4 (Autumn, 1998) p.366.

"Imitation" -as Ruskin calls *trompe l'oeil*- seeks to hide the fact that it is a flat canvas, covered with paint, and pretends to be something that is not. Yet, while pretending to inhabit the real, imitative art always has "some means of proving at the same moment that it is a deception". Ruskin insists that we refuse the seductions of *trompe l'oeil* in favour of a celebration of truth in art. He seeks to define a referential mimesis, an art that will prompt the viewer to focus on the truths of the world and to ignore the making of the art itself.

<sup>52</sup> Levine, *The Pleasures of Suspense: Victorian Realism and Narrative Doubt* p.23.

Ruskin's language in his description of St. Mark's, doesn't have as its goal to give us a general, "objective" picture of space. Far from the notion of verisimilitude that would endeavour to "reconstruct" the spatial reality of the church, we are dealing with a personal expression, a desire to convey the dreamlike sensation that he is experiencing, his own "reality".

Moreover, Jennifer Bloomer<sup>53</sup> when discussing his prose, points out Ruskin's intense focus on detached details, his adherence on the tiniest bit of stone or stroke of paint. As a result, the reader, who is looking for the "big picture" is driven to distraction.

This failure to apprehend the spatial qualities of buildings is one of the things that Ruskin was accused of. Nevertheless, his descriptions are charming. It would worth here return to Adrian Kuzmiski's "defence of realism", according to which what matters in a realistic work –whether literary or historical- is the way we are absorbed by it, the way we "indulge to it". It is a mark of success of the narrative to require no intellectual strain, to simply be that text that is "impossible to put down".<sup>54</sup>

### 3.2.2 "word-painting": between pictorial and literary realism

There is a consistency in the way Ruskin talks about art and its representational methods and the way he writes. The notion of "word-painting" seems to bridge his interests in representation and to delimit-designate his writing. Pictorial realism and literary realism thus, blur into one another. Rhoda L. Flaxman in her work *Victorian Word Painting and Narrative* defines word painting as the "extended passages of visually oriented descriptions whose techniques emulate pictorial methods".<sup>55</sup> "Word-painting-writing" uses frames, compositional methods, light and colours as in visual representations, through the perspective, the viewpoint of a particular spectator. Ruskin's successive changes of frames, transforms these static pictures to a "dramatization of the visual", to a spatial progression through a landscape. His descriptions are thus transformed into narrations reminding us of the first cinematographic endeavours.

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<sup>53</sup> Jennifer Bloomer, "Ruskin Redux", *Assemblage* no.32 issue on Ruskin, guest ed. Jennifer Bloomer (April 1997).

Kristine Ottesen Garrigan also comments on Ruskin's preoccupation with small details as being revelatory of his whole way of apprehending reality. She also interestingly evokes his drawings as evidence: Ruskin "worked at depicting tiny, isolated subjects" and "even in his larger more comprehensive sketches of architecture and landscape, minutely detailed passages stand out". Garrigan, "The Ultimate Significance of Ruskin's Architectural Writings" p.184.

<sup>54</sup> Kuzmiski, "Defending Historical Realism" p.333, 338.

<sup>55</sup> Rhoda L. Flaxman, *Victorian Word-painting and Narrative: Toward the Blending of Genres* (UMI Research Press Ann Arbor, 1987) p.1.

A series of verbs lead us slowly from the English landscape, back to Venice, to its streets, plazas and porches and finally into the church where, “then, we forget them all”.<sup>56</sup>

Ruskin creates the illusion that the reader’s vision is joined with the narrator’s. He makes no mention of an “I” in his description. All the “we” and “us” have eventually led us in the centre of the description and of architectural interest, into the heart of the building, following the exhortation “let us enter the church”.

And there, after another “magic charm of the semi-colon”, things, rather abruptly, change. A grave “now” at the beginning of a paragraph,<sup>57</sup> gives the spark for a somehow different history of architecture, more “academic” and maybe a bit more ordinary. Ruskin suddenly starts to talk about “construction”, “principles”, “intentions”, “critique” and other notions-words of the architectural vocabulary that we had almost forgotten.

We could generally say that Ruskin wrote in a “patchwork manner”<sup>58</sup>. His writing has a spatial, a “woven” quality, with lines of prose that lead the reader to different paths than those he would expect. His free associative writing creates non-linear forms of narratives that show how comfortable he felt in the space of writing, an easiness that he had admitted himself, too.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice* §13 p.82.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, §24 p.93.

<sup>58</sup> Garrigan, “The Ultimate Significance of Ruskin’s Architectural Writings” p.188.

<sup>59</sup> Ruskin insists that writing gave him no serious trouble. He was “always done as quietly and methodically as a piece of tapestry. I knew exactly what I had to say, put the words firmly in their places...” *Ibid.*, p.187.

His talent has been discussed many times, with several references to Ruskin’s childhood and his discursive personality. Pevsner, too, believing that biographical information about an author had some important bearing on the interpretation of his writings, referred to the letters that Ruskin’s father wrote to him praising his writing skills, affecting, thus, our way of perceiving and discussing his work.

Alexandrina Buchanan, “Nikolaus Pevsner and the Architectural Writers of the Nineteenth Century” in *Reassessing Nikolaus Pevsner* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004) p.97 and.

Nikolaus Pevsner, “Ruskin”, in *Some Architectural Writers of the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 1972) p.139.

## 4. Pevsner: *The Pioneers*

### 4.1 from realism to modernism

Modernism can be read as an opposition to realism. If we return to literature so that to explore the modernism-realism relationship, we could draw some interesting comments. In this comparison we could schematically and rather roughly consider Ruskin as closer to realism and Pevsner, as we will see, to modernism.

The way realism approaches reality is not fixed. As we've seen, its most simplified formulation presents it as a mere reflection of reality, while it could also mean criticism or opposition to this reality. In any case, the birth of modernism and the decline of realism signal a transition to the representation of the "unrealized",<sup>60</sup> the formation of a sense of future, the need for new forms. In literature, this tendency is expressed through a demonstration of the creative potentials of language, the experimenting around the limits of style and form and towards the dissolution of form. In the case of architectural history, we do not detect parallel explorations in the language that is used. We could say though, that Pevsner's choices –in his work that we will discuss- show exactly this "sense of future" and the faith, if not in language, at least in that kind of architecture that will realize the, until then, "unrealized".

From Pevsner's vast oeuvre we will focus more on his book *The Pioneers of Modern Design*.<sup>61</sup> One could suppose that since we are mainly preoccupied with the subject matter of description, it would be evident to centre upon his series of *The Building of England*, since the architectural guidebook, as a literary genre, is that which is based *par excellence* on descriptions. The choice of Pevsner for discussion is for the reason of his being the

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<sup>60</sup> Preisendanz. *Wege des Realismus* p.84.

<sup>61</sup> *The Pioneers of Modern Design* was first published in 1936 under the title *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*. In 1960 a new revised edition was published, including several changes and a new introduction by Pevsner. It is a book that has been much criticized and a big part of the criticism was engaged with Pevsner's choices and omissions -what his student Reyner Banham referred to as a "selective and classicizing" narrative- despite the second edition's aspirations. Nigel Whiteley. "The puzzled lieber Meister: Pevsner and Reyner Banham" in *Reassessing Nikolaus Pevsner* p.216 In this essay I have used the revised edition of 1960. Nikolaus Pevsner. *Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius* (Penguin Books, 1960).



writer of such an immense work of numerous descriptions of buildings.<sup>62</sup> The reason, however, that we will centre on the *Pioneers* is that it is interesting to see the way description functions in a narrative, in a book which is the *story*-history of the Modern Movement, and to focus on its vocabulary, which is the vocabulary of the Modern.

The *Pioneers* is not straightforwardly a history of architecture-book. It could also be read as a manifesto. In any case, as we will see, Pevsner, carrying with him the legacy of his German education in the history of arts, placed objectivity as the main goal of art history.<sup>63</sup> It is notable, that German art historians were thinking of their subject more as “art science” than “art history”. This German education, for the first time, is expressed through a new language, English, instead of his native language German. But above all, Pevsner is a Modernist and in the *Pioneers*, what we mostly read is the language of Modernism. And we should here, make a small detour and leave the particular text for a moment, to have a more general view on the Modernist writing on art and architecture in the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>.

## 4.2 suspicion of language

German aesthetics of the late

19<sup>th</sup> century, believed in the individuality of each of the fine arts. Each art had to demonstrate the kind of experience it provided on its own account, through its own medium. As Clement Greenberg says in his article “Modernist Painting”, what had to be exhibited was “that which was unique and irreducible in each particular art”.<sup>64</sup>

In architecture, the unique element that defines it is “space”. Pevsner, in his introduction of the *Outline of European Architecture* and being influenced by his German precedents like

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<sup>62</sup> The importance of Pevsner’s guidebooks is not questioned. Their “democratizing” project of making the art of architecture accessible to the general public, as analyzed by Adrian Forty, is one of Pevsner’s most important attainments: His whole literary enterprise can be seen as “a heroic attempt to take the mystery out of architectural language and thereby to democratize architecture”. It is exactly what Reyner Banham referred to as Pevsner’s “snap-crackle-pop” prose, alluding to the vital way that his writing was engaged with the experience of architecture.

Adrian Forty, “Pevsner the Writer” in *Reassessing Nikolaus Pevsner*, ed. Peter Draper (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004) p.91-92 and,

Reyner Banham, “WORLD, the: book to change, a” in *The Architects’ Journal* December 8, 1960 p.809.

<sup>63</sup> Panayotis Tournikiotis, “The Art Historian and the Founding Genealogies of Modern Architecture” in *The Historiography of Modern Architecture* (MIT Press, 1999) p.23.

<sup>64</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting” in *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Modernism with a Vengeance 1957-1969, Volume 4* (University Of Chicago Press, 1995) p.86.

August Schmarsow or his teacher Wilhelm Pinder, defines space as the essence of architecture. It is architecture's spatial quality that "distinguishes it from painting and sculpture".<sup>65</sup> In this effort of arts to be self-defined, language seems to have no place except from those arts that correspond to it. A suspicion of language, as an unnecessary accessory in creating and experiencing art, was dominant. The fear that "the ultimate experience of art laid beyond language"<sup>66</sup> was spread to all the genres of art.

Description of architecture in this context becomes, thus, a difficult case. Since talking about the objects is prohibited, the only way to compromise with the otherwise necessary co-existence with language –a necessity refused or not admitted- is the creation of a vocabulary, of a scientific terminology of modernism, that is not in collision with the new spirit of the machine age. The words "space", "form", "design", "structure", "order" form the basis of this new language and are often defined through each other.<sup>67</sup> The flowery language, the metaphors and other literary tricks are set aside. A series of abstractions and generalities replace that which is concrete and tangible.

But Pevsner, does believe in description. As he has admitted "architectural values can be appreciated only by describing and analyzing buildings at some length"<sup>68</sup> and this comment allow us for a moment to go back to Michael Baxandall and the way he connects description to explanation, considering it as the mediating object of explanation.

### 4.3 history in search of time future

To a large extent, the features of modernist writing can be traced within the *Pioneers*. As Adrian Forty notes, Pevsner is a historian very cautious with the choice of the language he is using, depending on the period of architecture that he is studying. This "historical specificity"<sup>69</sup> of his language is also

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<sup>65</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture* (Penguin Books, 1963) p.15.

<sup>66</sup> In painting specifically, there are the well known quotations by Francis Bacon, "If you can talk about it, why paint it?" or Picasso's, "A painting, for me speaks by itself. What good does it do, after all, to impart explanations? A painter has only one language..." On the other hand, Mies van der Rohe's "Build, don't talk" could be seen as the architectural equivalent of Francis Bacon's phrase.  
Forty, *Words and Buildings* p.21 and,  
Juan Pablo Bonta, "Reading and writing about Architecture" in *Design Book Review* (no.18, 1990) p.13.

<sup>67</sup> Forty, *Words and Buildings* p.22.

<sup>68</sup> Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture* p.9.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p.89.

apparent in the *Pioneers*. Apart from the words “space”, “form”, “design”, “structure”, “order”, modern architecture is described through a series of aesthetic judgments that are revolving round the basic themes of “honesty” and “purity” of the new architecture. The few adjectives used, also belong in this same subject and serve the same purpose:

*“uncompromising”, “shameless nakedness”, “plain”, “simplicity”, “simple geometric patterns”, “delicate lines”, “honesty and saneness”, “clearly exhibited”, “pure work of architecture”, “strength and noble vigour”, “purity of form”, “sobriety”, “boldness of structure”, “glasswalls clear without mystery”.*<sup>70</sup>

On the other hand, the disapproved architecture is rarely described. Pevsner’s pursuit of *sachlichkeit* seems, at some points, to hover. The neutral and objective descriptions are often accompanied by enthusiastic judgments and the book moves from history to a manifesto of the Modern Movement.

Descriptions are generally short, without interrupting the general flow of the book which is the narration of pioneers of the Modern Movement. Especially in the last chapter of “The Modern Movement before Nineteen-fourteen”, the constant reference and adherence to the dates of the works described, show his goal to discern, as a “stylistic talent-spotter”,<sup>71</sup> those works that are *ahead* of their time. Pevsner’s “non-style” writing, more than searching for the “reality” of the present is seeking for a sense of future and what is striking is his constantly repeated comment about those buildings that could have very easily been misdated:<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> We come across at those word-samples at several points within the book. For example they appear in the pages 179, 180, 194, 202, 203, 204, 206, 217.

In addition to the modernist vocabulary, we could also refer to the word “totalitarian”, the use of which created a quite important dispute between Pevsner’s harsh critic David Watkin and Reyner Banham. Pevsner’s use of such a vocabulary in the 1930s was criticized as taking on some of the features of German nationalist propaganda. However, when the *Pioneers* was republished some of these phrases were toned down, so that “the great creative brain” became “genius” and “totalitarian” “universal”, but, “whether this was at Pevsner’s instigation or his publisher’s is not known”. The word “universal” that substituted “totalitarian” appears in the *Pioneers* p.215. Stephen Games, “Introduction” in Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pevsner on Art and Architecture: The Radio Talks*, Ed. Stephen Games (Methuen, 2002) p.xxi and, Reyner Banham, “Pevsner’s Progress” in *A Critic Writes: Essays by Reyner Banham* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) p.219.

<sup>71</sup> Banham, “Pevsner’s Progress” p.221.

<sup>72</sup> David Watkin, *Morality and Architecture: the Development of a Theme in Architectural History and Theory from the Gothic Revival to the Modern Movement* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1977) p.93.

Tony Garnier's Industrial City (1901-04): "*For the first time here the possibility of 'misdating' arises*"

August Endell's Studies in basic building proportions (1898): "*The shape of the first-floor windows and the flat roof are again almost 'misdatable'*".

Adolf Loos's Steiner House (1910): "*Who, without being informed, would not misdate these features?*"<sup>73</sup>

This certain attention Pevsner pays on dating and chronology can be read in relation to the notions of "plot" and "*emplotment*" that we encountered in reading history as narrative.

The *Pioneers* is a narrative with an internally consistent plot, that Pevsner scarcely departs from. In this plot, his descriptions are distinct short episodes that are leading to the completion of the story. The examples he describes are following a chronological and geographical order that seems to culminate. Germany, the year 1914, Gropius and the Model Factory for the Werkbund Exhibition are left as the final example. It is exactly the piece of work that Pevsner chose to exemplify his lifelong principles of the new International Style.

And it is here, that the generally dry style of his writing suddenly changes. For a moment, it acquires a peculiar liveliness. His description slips to a generalization, to a poetic tendency of a sentence—oddly much longer than the rest—that tries to describe, to condense the whole spirit of the new age, its *zeitgeist*, within the building of Pevsner's favorite Gropius:

*"It is the creative energy of this world in which we live and work and which we want to master, a world of science and technology, of speed and danger, of hard struggles and no personal security, that is glorified in Gropius's architecture, and as long as this is the world and these are its ambitions and problems, the style of Gropius and the other pioneers will be valid"*.<sup>74</sup>

If we would like to recall the question of what could realism in architectural history mean and what kind of "realities" are created by the narration of architectural history, then, in the case of Pevsner, the answer would be a bit hard to answer. Taking for granted Pevsner's preoccupation with the new promising reality of the modern movement, with the "future", to talk about "realism" seems rather incongruous. Pevsner seems to neglect what could be called as the "existing reality" of his time, focusing on an elite avant garde, participating in the establishment of this "new reality" to come. And as Vladimir Nabokov has written, "the

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<sup>73</sup> Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design* p.182, 194, 200.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p.217.

future doesn't have this kind of realism as does the imagery past and the sensible present. The future is more a spectrum of thought".<sup>75</sup>

#### 4.4 obsessive observer

With very few exceptions, the buildings described correspond to a respective photograph. And the overwhelming majority of the pictures are exterior views. There are also, no ground plans, or even sections, that could reveal the mystery of the arrangement of space behind the facades. And if we venture some more conclusions, we would notice that most of these pictures have been taken from a similar point of view, sharing a similar vanishing point. They are not photographs-elevations, but photographs that offer the broadest possible angle of the rectangular prism in which the buildings are inscribed. Thus, standardized through their similar photographing, buildings stand as symbols-the symbols of the Modern Movement. The pictures are not Pevsner's own pictures. His descriptions, even though they correspond to them, do not imply that they are based exclusively on them. Pevsner is the historian of "having been there". His descriptions are based on direct and first hand experience. His whole work of *The Buildings of England* has proved his skills as an "observational historian". That is why, maybe, in *Pioneers* too, we cannot read Pevsner but as a traveller-a beholder.

This kind of history of architecture has been so successfully, called by Robert Maxwell the "Rhetoric of Presence": "I have been there and seen for myself, and that is my license to speak".<sup>76</sup> Photographs seem to *follow* Pevsner's mind, to prove his comments. Apart from his German influences, the influence of the English tradition of empirical analysis and emphasis on experience becomes, thus, evident. In a reverse process, we can trace back his route, and follow his "searching eye",<sup>77</sup> holding in hand the paper-back editions of his books in front of the buildings visited.

It is also worth noticing the role of detail in Pevsner's modernist writing and how abstraction in discourse doesn't allow margin for detailing and ornamental descriptions.

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<sup>75</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Transparent Things* translated in Greek by Katerina Gouma-Metaxa (Kastaniotis, 1999) p.9

<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Reyner Banham, "Actual Monuments" in *A Critic Writes. Essays by Reyner Banham* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) p.283.  
As Nigel Whiteley notes in his book *Reyner Banham: Historian of the Immediate Future* (note.119, p.474). Banham is misquoting Maxwell's phrase "The Plenitude of Presence" as appeared in his article "Reyner Banham: the Plenitude of Presence" in *Architectural Design* (6 7 1981) p.52-57.

<sup>77</sup> Paul Crossley, "Introduction" in *Reassessing Nikolaus Pevsner*, ed. Peter Draper (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004) p.21.

We don't know if Pevsner's gaze focused on details, and probably it did, we do not, though, perceive it through his descriptions and the speed by which one follows the other. That is maybe, because focusing on details automatically means a personal selection, the exclusion of other details, a deviation from the quest for the desirable objectivity. Pevsner, rather chooses to talk about those features of the buildings that have been innovative and that characterized the whole Modern Movement in the years that followed. Thus, at times it seems that the particular building he is describing could well be another typical modernist example.

If we would like to go back to Ruskin and the way he conveys through his writing the experience of space, comparing it to Pevsner's, we could draw up several differences. Pevsner, like Ruskin, is also a controversial historian. Despite his sharp criticism of Ruskin's arrogance and egotism, Pevsner admits his skills as an "intelligent observer".<sup>78</sup> It is, moreover, the same perceptiveness that is innate in Pevsner, too. Observational skills and the dream of "becoming a writer" seem to be two things that follow each other. Both historians, as children, shared this same dream.<sup>79</sup> As art historians, though, they followed different directions.

Pevsner, through his descriptions doesn't attempt "to simulate the experience of seeing".<sup>80</sup> He tries to explain as clearly as possible, encouraging what he called "the shedding of abracadabra",<sup>81</sup> he opens the reader's eyes but, "he doesn't do the looking for us".<sup>82</sup> Ruskin, on the other hand, who with his magic tricks guided us in Venice, gets more personally engaged with his readers. He tries to share his sense of experiencing space using for this purpose, as we have seen, all the syntax and his writing talent.

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<sup>78</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner, "Ruskin" in *Some Architectural Writers of the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 1972) p.143.

It is this same quality that Rosalind Krauss, very interestingly presents, through a flashback to Ruskin's childhood.

Rosalind Krauss, "chapter One", in *The Optical Unconscious* (MIT Press, 1994) p.1-7.

<sup>79</sup> "As a boy, he wanted to be a writer like the celebrities who attended his mother's literary and musical salons but showed his greatest originality in the obsessive cataloguing of the minutiae of his everyday life. After several attempts of writing stories in the style of Thomas Mann, he took stock of his talents and decided to become an art historian".

Games, *Pevsner on Art and Architecture: The Radio Talks* p.xiv.

<sup>80</sup> Adrian Forty, "Pevsner the Writer" p.90.

<sup>81</sup> Crossley, "Introduction" in *Reassessing Nikolaus Pevsner* p.20.

<sup>82</sup> Jonathan Meades quoted in Forty, "Pevsner the Writer" p.90.

## 5. Detail

### 5.1 Robbe-Grillet: description-realism-detail, once again in nouveau roman

Alain Robbe-Grillet's *nouveau roman* introduces a new realism. Through his writings in the first years of its formation, we will see how the notions of description, realism and detail are re-defined, acquiring new interesting meanings. The suspicious kind of faith in detailed accounts of reality as it is presented in dictionary entries and the criticism of this faith as we saw it in Ruskin or Preizendanz, becomes, in Robbe-Grillet's work, even more rigorous.

Robbe-Grillet admits that the first literary realism of 19<sup>th</sup> century had as its goal "to make the reader see" and that it succeeded in doing so. He is, though, rather strict in defining the "real" and the writer's role in relation to it. According to Robbe-Grillet all the precise details of the narrative seem to have as their goal to convince the reader of the "objective existence" of a world that the writer merely tries to reproduce, to copy, to transmit, in a manner similar to that of writing "a chronicle, a biography, a document of some kind".<sup>83</sup> In a way similar to Baudelaire he states: "All writers believe they are realists".<sup>84</sup> But Robbe-Grillet deeply respects the different nuances that the notion of "reality" can acquire. He accepts the difference between reproducing and creating "the real" and he is rather suspicious of words such as "resemblance" or "verisimilitude". As he trenchantly writes:

*"The weight of things posited in a precise fashion constituted a stable and certain universe, to which one could then refer, and which guaranteed by its resemblance to the "real" world the authenticity of the events, the words, the gestures which the novelists would cause to occur there".*<sup>85</sup>

This pejorative use of the notion of "resemblance" and mostly of "verisimilitude" or the faith in the "lack of perfection" that we encountered in Heiner Müller, is a common attitude that we trace in literature as much as in arts or in psychoanalysis. As Lacan has taught us, a perfect illusion is not possible and even if it were possible, "it would not answer the question

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<sup>83</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Time and Description in Fiction Today" in *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction* trans. Richard Howard (Northwestern University Press, 1989) p.146.

<sup>84</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, "From Realism to Reality" in *For a New Novel* p.157.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p.146.

of the real, which always remains behind and beyond, to lure us".<sup>86</sup> As he charmingly writes, the encounter with the real is "a *rendez-vous* at which we are always invited but with a real that constantly runs away".<sup>87</sup> Verisimilitude's inefficiency regarding the unrepresentability of the real, is also evident in the *nouveau roman*. Robbe-Grillet also accurately writes with his own personal manner that the little detail which "rings true" is no longer the novelist's goal. What strikes him is, on the contrary, "the little detail that rings false".<sup>88</sup>

Moreover, the ability of the reader of the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel "to see" cannot be enough. Robbe-Grillet takes the French tradition of realism a few steps further when talking about "freedom of observation".<sup>89</sup> Objectivity may be just an illusion, the freedom of observation though, should be possible, and he admits that unfortunately it is not. He is afraid of a "blindness" which we should resist, that prevents us from contacting the "crude reality" of things.<sup>90</sup>

*"Behind the table, on the mantelpiece, is a large rectangular mirror in which can be seen half the French window (the right half), and, to the left (that is, to the left of the window), the reflection of the mirrored wardrobe. In the mirror of the wardrobe the window can be seen again, all of it this time, and the right way around (that is, the right half on the right, the left half on the left)."*<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Hal Foster, "The Return of the Real" in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century* (MIT Press, 1996) p.141.

<sup>87</sup> Jacques Lacan. "The Unconscious and Repetition" in *Le Seminaire de Jacques Lacan-Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la Psychanalyse. Livre XI* translated in Greek by Andromahi Skarpalezou (Kedros, 1982) p.76 (my translation).

English translation: *The four fundamental concepts of psycho-analysis* trans. Alan Sheridan ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (London: Vintage, 1998).

Lacan, alluding to Aristotle, uses the Greek word *tuché* (casualty) to refer to the missed encounter with the real. On the other hand, *automaton* is the word he uses to refer to the repetition of the repressed as *symptom* that, in contrast to the real itself, offers us "a consistency, even a pleasure".

Foster, "The Return of the Real" note.29 p.264

<sup>88</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, "From Realism to Reality" in *For a New Novel. Essays on Fiction* trans. Richard Howard (Northwestern University Press, 1989) p.163.

<sup>89</sup> Robbe-Grillet, "A Fresh Start for Fiction" p.100.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p.101.

This "crude reality of things" is reminiscent of similar expressions such as the "intensive existence of objects" or the "poetry of things" that Georg Lukacs uses in his article "Narrate or Describe". Lukacs, though, in a marxist critique, is rather critical with positions as such: for him a "poetry of things" doesn't worth much if it is not related to people and people's life. For him the descriptive method lacks humanity. The autonomy of the details, the accuracy of the technical detail, has deleterious effects on the representation of men's lives: it degrades them to *still lives*. Lukacs, "Narrate or Describe" p.135, 139.

<sup>91</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Three Reflected Visions" in *Evergreen Review* (vol.I, no.3, 1957) p.105.



However, Robbe-Grillet is a writer famous for his exhaustive descriptions and the numerous tiny details in his literary work. The passage quoted above should not be considered as contradicting his literary theory. His own meticulous descriptions apart from aiming towards the freedom of observation designate the completely different role of description in *nouveau roman* in comparison to that in 19<sup>th</sup> century realist novels. Whereas once it served to form the setting of a story and it claimed to reproduce a pre-existing reality, it now “asserts its creative function”.<sup>92</sup> Whereas the reader used to seek the evolution of a story and in doing so he could skip the descriptions, in the case of *nouveau roman* description has a far more substantial role:

*“Obviously when the same reader skips the descriptions in our books, he is in danger of finding himself at the end of the volume whose contents will have escaped him altogether; imagining he has been dealing hitherto with nothing but the frame, he will still be looking for the picture”.*<sup>93</sup>

The above Robbe-Grillet’s painstaking description of a room, is only a small sample of his experiments in literature. It could be argued that such a detailed approach of space has as a result space not to be communicated. The reader who is searching for an intelligible overall picture of space is in the same puzzled position as the reader Robbe-Grillet refers to, who is seeking the overall plot of a story. The case of Ruskin, his “patchwork manner” of writing that we have already seen, is an example where the adherence to tiny details had given rise to unfavourable comments. A criticism as such might at some points be reasonable. Sometimes, though, a detail that insists in our memory, that haunts us, that we remember so clearly that we could meticulously describe it, is more important than space itself, even if it is just a small fragment of it. Despite the “poetic” character of such an argument, we will see how it could work beyond literature, in the more “austere” space of architectural history, through the writing of Reyner Banham.

### 5.2.1 Detail

In the way *nouveau roman* is related to description we overtly implied the importance of detail and its structural role in Robbe-Grillet’s work. The notion of detail holds the third apex of the triangle between description-realism-detail that was initially formed and the bonds between the three notions

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<sup>92</sup> Robbe-Grillet. “Time and Description in Fiction Today” p.147.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., pp.147.

are, as we have seen, unbreakable. Indicative of this close relationship between detail and realism is Naomi Schor's comment that the history of detail has been viewed as "a footnote to the history of realism".<sup>94</sup>

The well known adage "God dwells in minutiae" has its own long history and the question of its origin is still open. Its French version "*le bon Dieu est dans le détail*" is supposed to belong to Flaubert and the German one "*Der liebe Gott steckt im Detail*" or the variant "Truth lies in the detail" is supposed to belong to Aby Warburg.<sup>95</sup> The architectural community, though, has associated it more with Mies van der Rohe.<sup>96</sup> Architectural detail has its own definition, a rather explicit one, that concerns the construction of a building, of a work of architecture. According Marco Frascari it is the minimal "unit of signification"<sup>97</sup> in the architectural production of meanings. There is, thus, an open question of how could architectural detail approach the detail in writing as we have seen it so far. Could it be that the architectural detail which captures the gaze, is at the same time the detail upon which narration in an architectural history text stops?

Before we approach the notion of detail in architectural history and the work of Reyner Banham as we have promised, we should insist a bit more on literature and the "new novel". We will further discuss the notion of detail through the work of Roland Barthes as he has devoted an important part of his work in studying Robbe-Grillet and because in Roland Barthes we encounter another defense: after the defense of description and realism, we will here encounter the defense of the "useless" detail.

### 5.2.2 in search of the real: a defence of the useless detail

Roland Barthes in his text "The Reality Effect",<sup>98</sup> written in 1968 and after he had departed from his early structuralist position, undertakes a critique of the rigid functional structures through the defence of what he calls the "useless details". In literature, like in architecture, "functionality" plays a

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<sup>94</sup> Naomi Schor. *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (Methuen, 1987) p.4.

<sup>95</sup> William S.Heckscher. "Petites Perceptions: An Account of *Sortes Warburgianae*" in *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* vol.4 no.1 Spring 1974 p.101.

<sup>96</sup> Marco Frascari. "The Tell-the-Tale Detail" in *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: an Anthology of Architectural Theory 1965-1995* ed. Kate Nesbitt (Princeton Architectural Press, 1996) p.500.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p.500.

<sup>98</sup> Roland Barthes. "The Reality Effect" in *The Rustle of Language* trans. Richard Howard (University of California Press 1989).

similar role. Description and details are reminiscent of the execrable status of ornament in functional architecture. Gerard Genette's allegory about the decorative role of description being similar to that of "a piece of sculpture in a classical building" is indicative of this correlation.<sup>99</sup>

There are, however, some "irreducible residues of functional analysis"<sup>100</sup> -insignificant gestures, insignificant objects, redundant words- that cannot find a place within the structure of a narrative. Structural analysis of narratives is at risk when it tries to subsume in its system -to "functionalize"- these enigmatically unjustifiable details. The significance of these insignificant details is that they denote what Barthes calls "concrete reality", similar to Robbe-Grillet's "crude reality" of things. Insignificant notations, futile and superfluous details are related to description and form a kind of a scandalous narrative luxury.<sup>101</sup>

In an interesting way, overtly concerning architectural history, Barthes also connects these details to historical narrative, connecting thus, literary realism to "objective history":

*"In historical narrative which is supposed to report "what really happened" the non-functionality of the detail, "concrete reality", becomes the sufficient justification for speaking. History is the model of those narratives, which consent to fill in the interstices of their functions by structurally superfluous notation (...) The incessant need to authenticate the "real" -through photographs, reportage, exhibitions of ancient objects, the tourism of historical sites- show that the "having-been-there" of things is a sufficient principle of speech".<sup>102</sup>*

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<sup>99</sup> Genette, "Boundaries of Narrative" p.6.

The derogatory place of detail, as directly related to ornament and the feminine, is another important topic extensively analyzed by Naomi Sforza in *Reading the Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*.

<sup>100</sup> Barthes, "The Reality Effect" p.146.

<sup>101</sup> Barthes also distinguishes description from narration according to the fact that description is characterized by *no finality* of action or of communication, while, on the other hand narrative appears as essentially "*predictive*": if you act this way, if you chose this alternative this is what will happen. The 'non finality' of description renders it a characteristic of the so-called "higher languages".

Nevertheless, Barthes recognizes that this is an extreme schematization and he admits that description has long had an aesthetic function: its finality was that of the "beautiful" in opposition to the functional genres of discourse, the legal and political.

Ibid., p.141.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p.146.

### 5.3.1 the “being-there” of things

In addition to Barthes’ defence of the redundant details-words that cannot be placed within a structure, Robbe-Grillet talks about the irresistible force of things that just *are* and resist finding a place in our “interpretive screen”. As he says: “Around us, defying the mob of our animistic or protective adjectives, the things *are there*”.<sup>103</sup> To characterize these “awkward residues” as “absurd” is exactly to define them in relation to a rational system, even through an opposition. For Robbe-Grillet, though, “the world is neither significant, nor absurd” and this “stubborn reality” that strikes us and causes the whole beautiful construction of interpretation to collapse, should be accepted in its mere *presence*.<sup>104</sup>

Against a new “tyranny”, similar to Genette’s “tyranny of narration” to which description is always submissive, things should be freed from the “tyranny” of signification. Their mere presence should be “beyond all explanatory theory that might try to enclose it in some system of reference, whether sentimental, sociological, Freudian or metaphysical”.<sup>105</sup> And this reading of Robbe-Grillet as a “*chosiste*”,<sup>106</sup> as the “destroyer of meaning”, is reminiscent of Adrian Kuzminski’s idea of an “innocent” description, non-theoretical and non-interpretative in the discipline of History.

The attention Robbe-Grillet pays on things and the place they hold in his descriptions, give us the right to make another detour and lay stress on the notions of “depth” and “surface” that are directly involved with description and to place them in a more general context, that of phenomenology.

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<sup>103</sup> Robbe-Grillet, “A Fresh Start for Fiction” p.100.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p.100.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p.102.

<sup>106</sup> Roland Barthes in his article “The Last Word on Robbe-Grillet?” makes a distinction between “two Robbe-Grillet”: The first is, as we’ve seen, Robbe-Grillet the “*chosiste*” and is more related to the early years of his work as expressed in *For a New Novel*. The second is what Barthes calls the “humanist” and has been formulated through Bruce Morrisette’s study on Robbe-Grillet. Roland Barthes, “The Last Word on Robbe-Grillet?” in *Roland Barthes: Critical Essays* edited and translated by Richard Howard (Northwestern University Press, 1972). p.197-204.

### 5.3.2 the appearance of things

*“A description is the enumeration of the attributes of a thing, of which several are accidental, as when one describes a person by his actions, his words, his writings, etc...it does not make it known in depth, because it does not enclose it or does not expose the essential attributes”.*<sup>107</sup>

The notions of “surface” and “depth” have long been in dispute. Description in this pejorative sense, as implied in the above definition by Marmontel, merely connected to the “surface of things”, acquires some “suspicious” connotations: it is doubtful if it can go beyond the “appearance of things”, reaching their *inner depth*. In search of the *inner meaning* of things, oppositional points of view present “surface” either as transparent -leaving meaning to be seen in the depth, or as reflective like a mirror –displaying a meaning lodged just in what the eye can see.

As Robbe-Grillet has admitted, not even nouveau roman, has managed to penetrate the “smallest corner” of the clear, smooth, intact surfaces of things. His critique of the “old myth of depth” is rather rigorous. For Robbe-Grillet the whole literary phenomenon has resided in this word *depth* – “so all inclusive and unique”<sup>108</sup> that aspires to summon up all the inner qualities, the “hidden soul of things”. In this effort profundity has functioned as a trap, and a rather dangerous one. For the new novel though, “the phenomenological play” on the surface of things,<sup>109</sup> their mere appearance, is perfectly rich enough to justify description’s role, in the same way that Barthes’ “insignificant details” are significant enough to “condense” the “real” itself.

Through the reading of Vincent Descombes’ work *La Meme et l’ Autre*<sup>110</sup> and mainly his chapter on phenomenology and Merleau-Ponty, the notion of description acquires one more

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<sup>107</sup> Jean François Marmontel’s article on “Description” in *Encyclopédie*, 1779.

Quoted in Edward S. Casey, “Literary description and Phenomenological method” in *Towards a theory of description* (Yale French Studies no 61, 1981) p.186.

<sup>108</sup> Robbe-Grillet, “A Fresh Start for Fiction” p.103.

<sup>109</sup> Casey, “Literary description and Phenomenological method” p.186.

<sup>110</sup> Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*. Translation of “La Meme et l’ Autre” by L. Scott-Fox and J.M. Harding (Cambridge University Press, 1980).

This relationship between Phenomenology and Description is also explored in Casey, “Literary description and Phenomenological method”. Casey notes that “description is supposed to be a preoccupation of philosophy and particularly of phenomenology, a self-proclaimed descriptive enterprise” Casey, “Literary description and Phenomenological method” p.185.

interesting dimension. Merleau-Ponty considers phenomena to be statements. Descombes' rationale in a way personifies objects and impel us to imagine of a "speaking space", suppressing the power that we exercise by language on things when we talk *about* them, when we impose on them the "prepositional *about* of description".<sup>111</sup> He argues that what "shows itself to me is measured in terms of that which it is possible for me to say about it. A phenomenon is thus identified with the sayable".<sup>112</sup> This way, Descombes defines phenomenology as description:

*"Its task is not to explain but to make explicit; to reproduce in discourse the statement which preceded the discourse and which is the phenomenon... Experience, for all its dumbness has much to say. To speak is therefore to give voice to that which does not know how to speak".*<sup>113</sup>

In a process that seems the reverse of that described by Michael Baxandall, where our discourse on images *follows* our looking of the image, description here is differentiated from explanation. Apart from the different temporal order of "looking" and "describing", there is an important distinction between description as perception and description as the latent being of things. In Descombes' definition our discourse *about* things expresses not our thoughts about them, but that which, dumb, implicit, latent was already present inside them. Through this phenomenological approach, the relation between the subject that describes and the object of description is thus under question. The detail of the preposition makes a difference: talking *about* things might become talking *with* or *through* things.

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<sup>111</sup> Casey, "Literary description and Phenomenological method" p.179.

<sup>112</sup> Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy* p.60.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p.60.

## 6. Reyner Banham: the Schindler House

The discussion on the notion of detail can acquire some more interesting dimensions if we see how it works when applied to a specific text of architectural history or criticism. As we have already said we will focus on Reyner Banham and his text "The Master Builders".<sup>114</sup>

Banham in this article talks about modern movement in California, in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, and more specifically about two houses, Gamble House by Green Architects and Schindler House by Rudolph M.Schindler. We will though, focus more on the Schindler House, because in his description something unexpectedly noteworthy happens.

Taking the story of the Schindler House from the beginning, we should note that by the time Banham is writing this article, in 1971, Schindler as an architect had won recognition, even after so many years. There is a consensus though, that his masterpiece was the Lovell House and the notable exception to this trend was Reyner Banham, who was the first to focus on the Schindler House as the architect's best work.<sup>115</sup>

His description of it starts with a reference to the California climate, the relationship between the indoor and outdoor spaces, the materials used, Schindler's influence from Europe and his genuine innovative style. And then, suddenly, in the midst of the text his narrative stops. A detached sentence starting with a "No, sorry", like a monologue, is that part of the text where we will focus:

*"His right hand did not lose its cunning, but his creative mind lost its inhibitions.*

*It is in the uses of concrete that this emerges most strikingly. No, sorry, it is the light switches that are most striking - usually a plain chain pull emerging from an equally plain hole drilled in the woodwork, so that years of use have worn the wood into a free-form keyhole shape".<sup>116</sup>*

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<sup>114</sup> Reyner Banham, "The Master Builders" in *A Critic Writes: Essays by Reyner Banham* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) p.166-174. The article originally appeared in *The Sunday Times Colour Supplement* (8 August 1971 p.19-27).

<sup>115</sup> Kathryn Smith, *Schindler House* (New York: Harry N.Abrams, 2000) note no.47. p.43.

<sup>116</sup> Banham, "The Master Builders" p.173.

This passage is rather important because through this small fissure in the flow of the text, a whole range of subjects is opened, regarding description, detail and realism in history, literature or even psychoanalysis. That which suddenly emerged in Banham's memory and in his writing and came to the surface, is a personal detail, very close to the "real" as it was introduced by Robbe-Grillet. It is a personal image, but at the same time an architectural detail and thus, in Banham's sentence two different worlds are co-existing, that of architectural history and of automatic writing. Recurring to Slavoj Žižek and his question of how could "the two Reals",<sup>117</sup> the Freudian Real and the scientific Real relate to each other, we seem here, to be close to an answer.

## 6.1 the different detail

Žižek and his reading of the detail and the real will help in explaining a bit better what we hastily named "Freudian Real" and through his thought, Banham's text acquires an interesting aspect. Žižek is trying to define the notion of real and reality through analyzing Freud's interpretation of dreams and the repeated descriptions of dreams by Freud's patients:

*"When one compares different verbal accounts of the same event, the standard procedure is to focus on what they all have in common – this common kernel is then considered "objective reality", while differences in the descriptions are attributed to the distorting effects of the partial subjective perceptions".<sup>118</sup>*

What Freud proposes though, when the interpretation of a dream gets stuck, is to follow exactly the opposite procedure.

*"The analyst should ask the patient to repeat the narrative of the dream again and again, and the crucial element, the clue to the dream's meaning, will be provided not by what remains the same in the successive narratives, but by the features with regard to which these narratives differ – it is the small changes, variations, omissions, discrepancies between the successive narratives which indicate the real kernel repressed by the dream's official narrative".<sup>119</sup>*

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<sup>117</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "The Two Reals" in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?: Four Interventions in the (mis)Use of a Notion* (Verso, 2001) p.198

<sup>118</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "The Burning Question" in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* p.192.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p.192.



For Žižek, this method that Freud proposes shows the difference between reality and the Real. It is the sameness, the overlapping features in the multiple of narratives that signal the reality of what “actually took place”, while the “insignificant” omissions or added details allude to the “Real of the dream”.<sup>120</sup> Žižek expands this definition of the detail that makes the difference, even to reports by witnesses that are describing an event, possibly a crime. We, one the other hand, cannot help relating it and applying it to our reading of Banham’s text.

The Schindler House is a building that by now has been published and commented on many times. Through reading about it in a series of books and articles, it is interesting to see how specific subjects are repeated.<sup>121</sup> The interpenetration of indoor and outdoor space, the way concrete meets wood and wood meets glass, the “slab-tilt” construction, the European vs the American influences, Frank Lloyd Wright’s influence, the L-shape or “three quarter swastika” shape, the destruction of the “box-shoe” rooms, the house as a “camper’s shelter”, the house as a cultural and artistic centre, are some of the themes that are constantly repeated when investigating the Schindler House. We could say that they form Žižek’s “objective reality”, the “official narrative” of the Schindler House.

Banham’s detail about the light switches is never mentioned to any of these texts. It is the small detail that makes the difference; we could argue that it indicates the “real kernel” repressed by the official narrative. For Banham, this small free-form hole in the woodwork, is exactly what strikingly displays Schindler’s creativity and freedom in designing and constructing his house. It is the detail that proves that his creative mind “lost its inhibitions”.

Banham’s detail, the way his narrative suddenly is interrupted by a three line description of an “object” is reminiscent of Robbe-Grillet’s adherence to details and to objects

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<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p.192.

<sup>121</sup> Judith Sheine, “The Schindler House” in *R.M.Schindler* (Phaidon, 2001) p.107-114.  
 Kathryn Smith, “The Schindler House” in *RM Schindler: Composition and Construction* ed.Lionel March and Judith Sheine (Academy Editions, 1993) p.115-121.  
 ——— *Schindler House* (New York: Harry N.Abrams, 2000).  
 Robert Sweeney, “Life at Kings Road: As It Was, 1920-1940” in *The Architecture of R.M.Schindler* ed. Elizabeth A.T.Smith and Michael Darling (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles in association with Harry N. Abrams, 2001) p.86-115.  
 Lorenzo Rocha Cito, “The House Studio: Casa Schindler” in *Lotus International* (no.119 2003) p.74-89.  
 David Gebhard, *Schindler* (San Francisco: Stout, 1997).  
 Marco Visconti, “R.M.Schindler Kings Road House, West Hollywood, 1921-22” in *Domus* (no.746 1993) p.78-83 +xxii.  
 Lionel March, “Residence RMS and Residence for Mr. and Mrs. E.How” in *Global Architecture* (no.77 1999) p.8-41.

themselves. Robbe-Grillet's realism claims an existence based only on itself and designates the all-too-famous "*dasein*", the being-there of things.<sup>122</sup> In this example by Banham, we could argue that for a moment, just for a few sentences, his description, too, is turning to itself, to the object described itself. And after this small deviation from the main narrative, Banham returns to the house's "official reality" and his description of the light switches becomes an isolated lucid part of the text.

## 6.2 Reyner Banham's *effet de réel*

Reading Banham's text in relation to Barthes' notions of *punctum* and *studium* would also be helpful.<sup>123</sup> They are those notions that Barthes uses in the analysis of pictures and can be thought of as part of his more general preoccupation with the detail as we saw it in the case of narratives. *Punctum* is that element in a photograph, that *detail*, that strikes you, pierces you. *Studium*, on the other hand, is what carries the photograph's obvious and intended meaning. As Hal Foster notes Barthes' punctum is a "personal effect".<sup>124</sup> It is that partial feature of an image, that paradoxically, while remaining a detail, "it fills the whole picture".<sup>125</sup> And as Barthes says, the *punctum* could be revealed only *after* the fact, when the photograph is no longer available:

*"I may know better a photograph I remember than a photograph I am looking at, as if direct vision oriented its language wrongly, engaging it in an effort of description which always miss its point of effect, the punctum".*<sup>126</sup>

In Banham's case, we are certainly not dealing with the description of a photograph, but with real space. We could insist though, in the way memory works, allowing details to come unexpectedly to the forth revealing a whole repressed truth. Banham seems like describing Schindler's house *after* having been there, and it seems like the memory of this certain detail strikes him unintentionally. The "No, sorry" in the beginning of his sentence

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<sup>122</sup> Barthes. "The Last Word on Robbe-Grillet?" p.199.

<sup>123</sup> Barthes. *Camera Lucida* (Vintage, 2000) p.25.

<sup>124</sup> Foster. "The Return of the Real" p.134.

<sup>125</sup> Barthes. *Camera Lucida* p.45.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p.53.

can be seen as him being caught by surprise by his own thoughts. As Lacan put it, the Truth has the structure of a fiction: “what appears in the guise of dreaming, or even daydreaming, is sometimes the hidden truth on whose repression, social reality itself is founded”.<sup>127</sup>

But this example by Banham, should not be considered as an occasional exception, an isolated instance in his work. Even this “No, sorry” can be read under his conversational, direct way of writing. We are dealing with a *writer*. And as Robert Maxwell has written, “Banham is a damned good writer”; “his writing has the intrinsic interest of revealing a picture *for the first time*”.<sup>128</sup> Nigel Whiteley also discusses his writing as a result of his personality and in comparison to his *lieber Meister* Pevsner. As he writes, Banham was “gregarious, extrovert and could be bombastic”; he described himself “as one who enjoys being astonished”<sup>129</sup> and he could convey his enthusiasm and a sense of immediacy to his readers through his “vibrant prose”. In contrast to Pevsner temperament, perhaps closer to the cold steel and glass of his favourite buildings, Banham can be seen as expressing exactly “the bravado and novelty of the 1960’s”.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Žižek, “The Burning Question” p.198.

<sup>128</sup> Robert Maxwell, “Reyner Banham: the Plenitude of Presence” in *Architectural Design* (6 7 1981) p.57, p.53.

<sup>129</sup> Whiteley, “The puzzled lieber Meister: Pevsner and Reyner Banham” p.224.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p.224.

## epilogue

*“From ancient times to the efforts of our avant-garde, literature has been concerned to represent something. What? I will put it crudely: the real... That the real is not representable, but only demonstrable, can be said in several ways: either we can define it, with Lacan, as the impossible, that which is unattainable and escapes discourse, or in topological terms we observe that a pluri-dimensional order (the real) cannot be made to coincide with a unidimensional order (language). Now it is precisely this topological impossibility that literature rejects and to which it never submits”.*<sup>131</sup>

*“we can say that literature...is absolutely, categorically realist: it is reality i.e., the very spark of the real”.*<sup>132</sup>

The insistence on literature at the end of this essay is deliberate. Barthes’ argument as it is expressed in his “Lecture in Inauguration”, that literature is the only alternative if we are seeking the freedom of speech, “outside the bounds of power”, is of great importance. As he says “it is within speech that speech must be fought...by the play of words”.<sup>133</sup>

When Barthes refers to literature though, he doesn’t imply a narrow definition of a discipline. By literature he doesn’t mean neither “a series of works, nor even a branch of commerce or of teaching”. He more refers to “the complex graph of the traces of a practice, the practice of writing”.<sup>134</sup>

*“Literature works in the interstices of science. It is always behind or ahead science”.*<sup>135</sup>

Through our reading of architectural history texts we tried to show the importance of the “practice of writing” that Barthes insists on. Approaching the texts through the microscope of words and through the lens of description, we tried to find exactly those “interstices” that allowed the emergence of the –unpresentable- real, of the “pluri-dimensional order” of space. The “useless”, but then so crucial detail, was the closest approach of the real within architectural descriptions of space.

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<sup>131</sup> Roland Barthes. “Lecture in Inauguration of the Chair of Literary Semiology. College de France. January 7,1977” in *October* vol.8 Spring, 1979 p.8.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6 As Barthes writes: “I can say without differentiation: literature, writing, or text”.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7

The faith in language, in description and detail as a literary device within the historians' writing, we believe has the ability to open up many fissures in architectural history. By dragging architectural history towards different directions, entering the space of literature, of History, and even for a moment touching psychoanalysis or "thing theory", a new vocabulary was formed and words such as narration, plot, real, could be a useful tool in writing and reading architectural texts.

In this essay some subjects often returned, making circles and revealing the personal obsessions of the writers whose voices were selected to be heard, close to the obsessions of the author of this essay. The creative function of description, the useless detail, the detail that makes the *difference*, that "rings false", the "being-there" of things, the unexpectedly emerging real, were subjects that penetrated this work either belonging to a discussion of literature, history or architecture.

Several oppositions and disputes were also heard. On one hand, the distrust in verisimilitude and precision, and on the other hand the freedom of seeing; description as interpretation or an "innocent" non-explanatory description; description as perception or description being latent in things. Robbe-Grillet's defence of realism in the 1950's and 60's, a century after 1850's realism, or the *Annales*' defence of a neo-positivism in the 1970's, years after Ranke's positivist legacy, are changes in history that could be read through the way they approach or draw away from the notion of description in different moments in time.

A series of paradoxes also complicated any inclination for definite and absolute positions. Description even if by definition could exist independently from narration, it usually holds a disadvantageous position comparing to narration. "Wrong" and imperfection may help in the emergence of the otherwise unrepresentable real. Direct vision might work as an obstacle for description in comparison to memory. Detail that is generally linked to a lack of seriousness, to blabbering, threatening thus, the scientificity of discourse, results to be the purveyor of truth.

In discussing these dissents, our position was not starkly unbiased. This essay leans towards and surrenders to the charm of Robbe-Grillet's, Barthes', Žižek's, Genette's texts. By following their steps in literary theory, we tried to see the different values ascribed in description and detail in the work of different architectural historians and in different literary genres. In this inquiry some questions remained unanswered; hopefully, though, this essay can be read as an investigation that is 'to be continued'.

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