

---

## INSIGNIFICANCE AND MINOR ARCHITECTURE

EURAU'10

---

*ABSTRACT. The fragmented condition of our everyday brings us closer to the risks of hyper-expression. Against it two positions unfold to help us face a world that escapes our capacities: familiarity and poetic recognition. In the latter it is crucial the role of the insignificant as dynamic and relational instigator of a conscious threading of reality through the actions of the Poeta Faber and his careful look onto the world. / The production of the common as the material and symbolic fabric of the city, unstable reality in a perpetual becoming, leads us to a new and much needed reconsideration of the public/private division born from the modern state. Immersed in the confusion between public and common, we have not perceived that through the expropriation of the first we have been prepared for the willing surrendering of the second. / From insignificance to rebellion as affirmative going into action related to the idea of minor architecture as common and intensely political production, born from the inside of a society that has no more outsides.*

*KEYWORDS: insignificance, minor architecture, everyday, poetics, politics*

---

**Lucía García de Jalón Oyarzun**

*Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid  
C/Fuente del Rey 34, 28023 Madrid, Spain - [jalonoyarzun@gmail.com](mailto:jalonoyarzun@gmail.com)  
+34659627471*

The 20th century sees the end of the grand universal narratives that had turned man into a mere recipient, a walk-on-part with luck, of History's show to give way to a slow but unstoppable atomization of reality through a gradual praising whilst objectifying action on the production of the everyday or the domestic. A process that, even if intending at its beginning to turn man into an actor who would actively dialogue with a world that is more than just a passive stage, has slowly turned him into an apathetic spectator of the new spectacle of a torn into pieces everyday.

### **An anthology of insignificance.**

Archeology, collections, catalogues, anthologies... In the game of the atomized everyday life, there is a lot of ways to approach the exaltation of the small.

Georges Perec suggested the archeology of the infra-ordinary, an idea that conveys a scientific feeling to the approach. His end being to undig objective, closed and indisputable realities, ready to be arranged in a showcase or a written list under the corresponding label. (1)

Quite related to that archeological work, though probably more free in its possibilities due to its origin in a single individual's enthusiasm, we have the collection, John Soane's museum or the Cabinets of curiosities, collections that mirrored the naive, though relentless, efforts of their perpetrators to embrace the infinite in their overcrowded rooms. But it is precisely the collector's curiosity that forces him to cross ordered categories and labels: enthusiasm is an unstoppable force that drives him away from scientific objectivity right into the most personal of storytellings.

A third approach quite popular nowadays is the catalogue, maybe because of its appealing relation with the domestic. The IKEA catalogue, the Christmas ones, one can even find architectural projects enclosing closed lists of the situations they will allow... in the end it is all about enclosing a whole range of possibilities that define a reality, each in its right category. Reality that, implicit or explicitly, is instantly on sale.

Albert Camus wrote in 1945 a "Preface for an Anthology of the Insignificant" in which he set himself to "scrupulously collect the cases of insignificance in

order to get closer to that more general meaning for which it might be interesting to be moved (shaken) and devote my life to it". The anthology connects with the collection, both share the same roots of enthusiasm and personal interest.

The insignificance implies an active appraisal done by the individual, since the insignificant interweaves with the observer's universe(s). But there is a whole different approach that merely states the material presence of the everyday, a static and sometimes just aesthetic, but always breaching, ascertainment. All these efforts have something in common, they try to thread the fragments, trying to find an order that brings us closer to an splintered reality without our mind collapsing in the perceptual approach.

### **Familiarity and poetic recognition.**

Facing the contemporary flood of information, of bits, the multiple invasion of demands, the impossibility to embrace them all, the human brain reaches his biological limits and reacts, either closing out to the world in a drastic way (anxiety and psychosis), or retreating from reality while sinking in apathy (depression). Franco Berardi, Bifo, has defined these reactions as the pathologies of hyper-expression (Berardi, 2004), all of them implying a separation between individual and world, be it because of a distorted perception of it or because of a gradually increasing indifference that feeds depression.

Confronted with this situation, it becomes more necessary than ever to recognize our human condition again, the animal condition of the aristotelian zoon politikon: his scale, his limits, his rythms and possibilities; leaving behind the machinist arrogance born from the Enlightenment that makes him believe able to embrace the whole universe, he will have to recover the immanent happiness and curiosity of a man who knew himself limited by his own condition.

Born from this analysis we can propose two concepts to define those encounters between fragments and the individual: familiarity and poetic recognition.

a) Familiarity or the man who delegates. Facing a world impossible to embrace as a whole, engulfed in a terrified need for security and order, we

think we find comfort in homogeneous worlds, in the repetition of spaces, shapes, brands, words... the consequent fall into inertia slowly freezes the system in which we move until any movement or exchange is thus made impossible (Koolhaas, 2007). Since there has not been any threading action space and time are still broken, we just don't feel it any more since everything feels homogeneously blurry, at least enough to keep us from making any effort.

b) Poetic recognition or the careful eye. Here we see a more subtle action founded in the combined act of creation and discovery of a complex symbolic fabric. It is through that process of unveiling and making that one becomes part of it, the result is thus not imposed but a negotiated recognition that demands that all parts involved, the people and the world, take an active part on it. Man has to be reclaimed as an active creator of his reality, Poeta Faber (Vesa Volanen, 2009), citizen-individual who, in his lively action, creates the needed continuity between the fragments of his world, linking spirit and matter, weaving space and time (Boyd, 2009).

It is in that movement of poetic recognition, where the rhyme, insignificance that awakes other insignificance, and the echoing games the careful eye discovers, where the action of the Poeta Faber lies, a threading that constructs duration and allows for new temporalities to arise. Far from being a mere static quality, waiting to be discovered, beauty lives in constant movement inside that rhyme that is rhythm (time), located in the origin of that enthusiasm that makes us *s'agiter*, be shaken.

**The common: the material and symbolic fabric of the city, unstable reality in perpetual (re)constitution.**

This act of threading is the production of the common, because just as there would be no language without its shared and collective origin, the city, the material and symbolic fabric that constitutes it, is also a shared construction born out of our everyday actions. Toni Negri and Judith Revel suggest that "notre commun, ce n'est pas notre fondement, c'est notre production, notre invention sans cesse recommencée. «Nous»: le nom d'un horizon, le nom d'un devenir. Le commun est devant nous, toujours, c'est un processus. Nous sommes ce commun: faire, produire, participer, se mouvoir, partager, circuler, enrichir, inventer, relancer." Fabric created and shared by all of us that has become, over the last decades, the main object and reason of contemporary economy (Negri and Hardt, 2000).

Implicit in that conquest of the contemporary market is the fact that the production of the common does not need the Poeta Faber to take place, to keep up its unstoppable progression, after all it is the simplest acts of our everyday life that give founding to that production. But it is important to point out that when the relation between the common and its unquestionable fragmentation is based on familiarity and inertia, instead of a symbolic text that feeds from its infinite complexity, we are flooded with fragments that break our relation to the world, and consequently our relation with time.

### **From the expropriation of the public to the surrendering of the common**

Immersed in the inertias of familiarity, sailing under its protection, man does not perceive the road that has brought him to a point where he has surrendered the most private aspects of his everyday life. The roots of this surrender, one that we could define as “unconsciously but willingly” given (2), must be looked for in the false public/private division which founded western states and democracies three centuries ago. This closed division, based on the property right instead of the right of use that defines the idea of the common, means that it is the state that expropriates the citizen of his shared authorship and property of the common production of his everyday actions, thus becoming the one and only rightful owner of the public (Revel and Negri, 2008), while turning democracy into a mere administrating structure for that singular mode of private property.

This situation evolves by gradually merging market and democracy, both united by the embracing concept of exchange value. Meanwhile the citizen has become so used to that separation from the common, immersed in the confusion between public and common, that he has not perceived that through the expropriation of the first he has been prepared for the willing surrendering of the second.

It feels important to emphasize the fact that it is not an expropriation nor a falsified transfer of that production of the common, but a surrendering. Never does the individual feel he has been deprived of something that is strictly his, nor does he feel the lack of continuance between the different scales and temporalities of his everyday living as a loss, even if it has left him stranded in a fragmented world of no-time.

So the new project for democracy must be based on recovering that fabric of shared symbolic production, becoming a constituent structure of the city

through the conscious production of the common by the zoon politikon, once again author and owner of his triple dimension of political, urban and social animal, because as wonderfully put by Emilio Lledó in his article "Atenas Ciudad de Palabras", the richness of the old democratic Athens can not be found in its ruins but in his words.

### **Rebellion and minor architecture.**

"Qu'est-ce qu'un homme révolté? Un homme qui dit non. Mais s'il refuse, il ne renonce pas : c'est aussi un homme qui dit oui, dès son premier mouvement."

« A la source de la révolte, il y a au contraire un principe d'activité surabondante et d'énergie."

"L'homme doit se déterminer à faire, pour être"

Albert Camus, L'Homme Révolté

Albert Camus writes his Preface to an Anthology of the Insignificant in 1945, deeply influenced by his close friend, the poet Francis Ponge, who publishes that same year of 1945 his most well-known work: *Le Parti Pris de Choses*. At the same time Camus is writing *La Peste*, a book in which the insignificance, through a character inspired by Ponge himself, and the idea of rebellion appear already as inseparable thoughts. Both linked to the practice of doing in a city where historical time has stopped to give way to the small times of the fabric of the common.

Rebellion has two main moments, one of negation that arises when we feel the danger of losing the integrity of that which we consider constituent of our being in the world, and a second one of affirmation based on our ability to act, to do, as answer to the first. But the surrendering of our everyday life, of our doing, has been voluntary, as it was explained before so we don't feel it as something dangerous for our founding actions.

In consequence, for rebellion to recover that action, that movement of doing, to do us conscious authors and owners of our own everyday, it cannot be born out of negation, but of the ascertainment of an absence.

We have left behind the possibility of opening our eyes through the use of reason and the illusion of a well-built explanation that would make us conscious of that absence. Comfortably indifferent in a fragmented reality,

every explaining action addressed to the contemporary man, becomes instantly another unconnected fragment subsumed by the movements of familiarity. So instead we should recover the link between insignificance and rebellion, using the insignificance fragmentary whilst relational condition.

The project of the insignificant as instigator of the poetic recognition must transform our approach to the city, to the spaces of the everyday life and the weaving of those visible and invisible fabrics, since the affirmation action of rebellion is purely architectural, being the creation of small spheres of multiple order, threads that weave fragments of reality in a game of patchworks, always leaving loose ends that might keep the field open, the story able to go on.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari define in their first book collaboration, *Kafka. Pour une littérature mineure* (1975) the idea of Minor Literature, which can be summarize in three main points:

a) it is the one that a minority builds with the language of the majority. That is, there is no possibility to act from an outside, from an-other language, since there is no longer that outside (Negri and Hardt, 2000).

b) it is intensely political, each situation is thus a possibility: "Ce qui au sein des grandes littératures se joue en bas et constitue une cave non indispensable de l'édifice, se passe ici en pleine lumière; ce qui là-bas provoque un attroupement passager, n'entraîne rien de moins ici qu'un arrêt de vie ou de mort" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1975)

c) it is a common production, and consequently one that dialogues.

Jennifer Bloomer recovers that notion and links it to the mention of a "major architecture" done by Manfredo Tafuri, which logically, Bloomer continues, implies the existence of a "minor architecture", in which "all the 'ambiguous objects' will fall". With the crossing references Bloomer discovers between Tafuri and Deleuze, important concepts for the definition of a minor architecture arise. Such as the "interlocutor" as subject that takes part and deciphers, pointing to an architecture where the role of the architect and the work is as important as that of the interlocutors, that-and-those with which they meet.

Meanwhile Doina Petrescu and Constantin Petcou (Atelier d'Architecture Autogérée), offer, from the idea of 'l'agir urbain' another approach to minor architecture based on language as action and action as language, one strongly influenced by urban rhymes and rhythms: "Nous cherchons ainsi à créer les conditions d'un vécu non prédéterminé, d'un vécu subjectif et producteur d'un récit collectif de l'espace urbain, à travers des fréquentations quotidiennes".

So we are talking about an architecture which is "not separate from, but upon/within/among" (Bloomer, 1995) reality, simply because there is no more outside to act from. But inside that interior that has become the only outside, sharing the language and reality, architecture suddenly realizes that it has to find itself in the most naked acts of architecture, in the intense acts where its structuring action is born. That is the moment when architecture breaks its disciplinary frontiers to become the constituent action of the zoon politikon, animal of the city, animal who creates the city.

Finally, minor architecture in its common condition arises through the collaboration of two kind of authors: one, the architect, who though trained in a major discipline has to rediscover what it means to talk in a language that has invaded all, a language he knows how to use but feels at the same time deprived from the voice of the insignificant where everything turns into a "life or death matter", and the second one, the citizen-interlocutor, poeta faber, who through his acts of poetic recognition becomes conscious of his creating part in architecture.

#### **Notes.**

1. It is also true that the same Georges Perec approaches that world of the minimum in quite a different way in different parts of *La Vie Mode d'Emploi* or *Penser/Classer*, when humour takes part in the game too, when Perec is not only writing but laughing. Introducing laughter, humour, we can feel the smile behind his words, and suddenly his work is flooded with the insignificant. In those texts Perec *relates*, and that's why he laughs, he goes to the encounter of the world and so his work goes way further than the mere ascertainment of the infraordinary.

2. Cessare Casarino (2008) suggests that there is a desire to be in common and a desire not to be, making thus implicit the will behind the separation between contemporary man and his everyday doing. It feels important to stress the strength of those hidden inertias created by the expropriation of the public sphere, because it is that which have taken this man to a point where he will willingly surrender his everyday production not knowing quite well what it is that he is surrendering, that's what is implied with the paradoxical idea of the "unconsciously but willingly" given.



## Bibliography.

- Arteta A., *La virtud en la mirada: ensayo sobre la admiración moral*, Pre-Textos, Madrid 2002
- Berardi Bifo F., *Patologías de la hiperexpresión*, in «Archipiélago», n. 76, 2008.
- Berardi Bifo F., *On the origin of stories: evolution, cognition, and fiction.*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass 2009.
- Bloomer J., *Architecture and the Text: The (S)cripts of Joyce and Piranesi*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1995.
- Camus A., *La Peste*, in *Oeuvres complètes : Tome 2, 1944-1948*, Editions Gallimard, Paris 2006.
- Camus A., *L'homme révolté*, in *Oeuvres complètes : Tome 3, 1949-1956*, Editions Gallimard, Paris 2008.
- Camus A., *Préface à une anthologie de l'insignifiance*, in *Oeuvres complètes : Tome 4, 1957-1959*, Editions Gallimard, Paris 2008.
- Casarino C., *In praise of the common: a conversation on philosophy and politics / Cesare Casarino and Toni Negri*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2008
- Deleuze G. and Guattari F., *Kafka. Pour une littérature mineure*, Éditions de Minuit, 1975.
- Koolhaas R., *Espacio basura*, Gustavo Gili, Barcelona 2007.
- Lefebvre H., *La vida cotidiana en el mundo moderno*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid 1972.
- Lefebvre H., *The Production of Space*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford 1991.
- Lledó E., *Atenas ciudad de palabras*, in ID, *Elogio de la Infelicidad*, Cuatro Ediciones, Valladolid 2005.
- Negri T. and Hardt M., *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass 2000.
- Perec G., *L'infra-ordinaire*, Seuil, Paris 1995
- Perec G., *Penser/Classer*, Seuil, Paris 2003
- Revel J. and Negri T., *Inventer le commun des hommes*, in «Multitudes», n. 31, 2008.

- Petcou C. and Petrescu D., *Agir l'espace. Notes transversales, observations de terrain et questions concrètes pour chacun de nous*, in «Multitudes», n. 31, 2008.
- Ponge F., *Soñadora materia*, Galaxia Gutenberg, Madrid 2007.
- Tafuri M., *Teorías e historia de la arquitectura*, Celeste Ediciones, Madrid 1997.
- Vesa Volanen M., *Nous poietikos as general intellect in the production of commons*, in «What is the common?», 2009.

#### **Author's biography.**

Studying at the Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid, she is currently researching on the possibilities that the anthologies of the insignificant might open as possible paths to reclaim a new relation to the urban, the surrendered everyday and its architecture, both from a theoretical and practical approach.