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From Iron to Glass: Transparency and Pluralism

Abstract

The author reads a number of recent architectural constructions in Paris (mainly the Louvre pyramid, but also the Musée d'Orsay and the Institut du monde arabe) and argues that they affirm the plurality of contemporary France while at once inscribing and subverting the conventions of its (once) dominant culture: the Arab world in the heart of Paris, the museum cum railway station as the focal point of conflicting tastes, the pyramid as both accomplice and critic of history. Their pluralism qualifies them as postmodern. These monuments also propose a new role for today's museum. The building itself becomes an art object, and the museum is not reduced to its function as a place for education and edification; it demands an inventive and exploratory initiative on the part of the visitor.

Keywords

architectural constructions, Paris, Louvre pyramid, architecture, Musée d'Orsay, Institut du monde arabe, plurality, contemporary France, inscribing, subverting, dominant culture, Arab, Arab world, museum, railway station, conflict, taste, pluralism, postmodern, history, criticism, art object, building, art, education, edification, visitor

From Iron to Glass: Transparency and Pluralism.

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Since 1985, Paris has been the scene of spectacular inaugurations: the opening of the *Géode* and the *Grande Halle* at La Villette in 1985, of the *Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie* on the same site in 1986; the opening of the *Musée d'Orsay* in 1986 and of the *Institut du Monde arabe* in 1987, of the Louvre pyramid in 1989, as well as of the *Arche de la Défense* and the *Bastille Opéra*. An impressive program, and one that seems intended to mark a new *fin de siècle*, in the manner of the Eiffel Tower a century earlier. But what relation can be discerned between the architectural gesture of the Eiffel Tower on one hand and those of the pyramid, the *Musée d'Orsay*, and the *Institut du Monde arabe* on the other? Continuity or change? The culmination of one era or the inception of another? In other words, can one say that these architectural objects are tokens of modernity and postmodernity, respectively?

According to Pierre Gaudibert, modern art “was born around the 1880s with the first industrial revolution, the rapid development of capitalism and the stock market, the expansion of imperialism, the transformation of the urban infrastructure, and mass consumption.” It manifests itself as “an act of vehement rupture,” of a “permanent revolution” (10-11).¹ Modernist architecture “concentrate[s] on pure space and form . . . and jettison[s] ornament, historical allusion, color, metaphor, and representation . . .” (Jencks, *Architecture* 178). The modernist principles are “rationality and order” (103) “logic, technique, repetition, structure, construction” (44) and abstraction, often resulting in impersonality, monotony and *transparence*.

Charles Jencks defines post-modernism in these terms:

Post-Modernism is fundamentally the eclectic mixture of any tradition with that of the immediate past: it is both the continu-

ation of Modernism and its transcendence. Its best works are characteristically doubly-coded and ironic, making a feature of the wide choice, conflict and discontinuity of traditions, because this heterogeneity most clearly captures our pluralism. (*What?*)

which echoes Renner's definition:

Whereas it is assumed that the modern building contains a single coding . . . the *postmodern* building has at its disposal that characteristic *double-coding*, which exhibits not only the stipulations of construction and the architectural process, but also the meaning of the building, its private, public or commercial function. The double-coding conforms as a matter of principle not only to the restrictions of building materials and construction techniques, but first and foremost to the *peculiarities of the environment* and the *requirements of the users*. (67, my emphasis)

If the Eiffel Tower is a sign of modernity, a symbol of the industrial age, the pyramid of the Louvre, the *Musée d'Orsay* and the *Institut du Monde arabe* at the same time exploit and subvert the past, use old techniques or forms with new materials and/or to new ends. All three are accomplices of the past, but also its critics. They separate themselves from it in order to change the present: this *pluralism* qualifies them as postmodern.

Certain obvious parallels can be drawn between the Eiffel Tower and the pyramid. There is indeed an abundance of points in common: both were built to commemorate the French Revolution; both were conceived as monumental entrances, the former for the World Fair and the latter for the Louvre; and both aroused storms of protest. Among the members of the artistic community who spoke out against the Eiffel Tower in 1887 were Charles Gounod, Guy de Maupassant, Alexandre Dumas (the younger), Leconte de Lisle, and Sully Prudhomme. Barthes reminds us in his article "The Eiffel Tower" that Maupassant "often lunched at the restaurant of the tower, though he didn't like it: it is, [Maupassant] used to say, 'the only place in Paris where I don't have to see it'" (33). Joris-Karl Huysmans begins his article entitled "Le Fer" with a paragraph that could refer just as well to the end of the twentieth century as to that of the nineteenth: "Architects put up preposterous monuments whose various parts,

borrowed from every age, constitute . . . the most slavish parodies to be seen anywhere. It is all a shapeless mess of platitude and pastiche" (343). And if Huysmans sees "a new style" in the Eiffel Tower, he nonetheless does not hesitate to compare it to "a factory smokestack under construction," to "a skeleton structure waiting to be filled with masonry or brickwork," to "an infundibular grating," and to "a solitary suppository full of holes" (346-47).

The pyramid has also given rise to violent diatribes among journalists and architects since work was begun on it. The magazine *Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, in its April 1988 issue, describes it as a "wart disfiguring a beautiful body," as a piece of "shoddy imported metallic architecture" (21). The novelist Denis Tillinac describes in *Le Figaro* of October 14, 1988 the "glacial geometry of the pyramid, its Cistercian rigor, its lack of sensuousness" (12). And the April 1989 issue of *A Suivre*, emphasizing the "incongruity" of the building, produces a list of its nicknames, including "pustule, gizmo, fake jewelry, hillock, oriental ghost ship, foreign body," appellations which betoken a rejection of this glass structure and its Chinese-American creator, Pei, as well as of the man chiefly responsible for the undertaking of the project, then President of the Republic François Mitterand.

It should not be supposed, however, that these two architectural objects have been universally condemned. Among those singing the praises of the Eiffel Tower have been engineers, who rejoiced in seeing their art invade the Parisian landscape; writers like Apollinaire and Aragon, who discovered "between these spread iron legs . . . a female organ one scarcely suspected was there"; Cocteau and Barthes; and of course painters, such as Rousseau, Chagall, Seurat, Henri Rivière, and especially Delaunay. And finally photographers, whose art was born at the same time as the tower: André Kertész, Marc Riboud, Robert Doisneau, Else Thalemann, and Germaine Krull have used the tower as an experimental laboratory which has enabled them to create a new esthetic sensibility, to experience physiologically inner and outer space, high and low, solid and hollow, base and summit (Perego).

The numerous writings on the tower display the evolution of the metaphors associated with it. The symbolism of the tower is at first that of the phallus, the will to dominate and the exercise of power. But the tower is also a hymn to the modern world, a call to modernity addressed to the cosmos, a desire for universality. It is indeed a sign of modernity, symbolic of the industrial age, of capi-

talism, of technological evolution and science, but also the emblem of a modern world in a state of crisis, as represented by Delaunay. Barthes seems to take stock of all these symbolic levels in the following words:

Glance, object, symbol, the Tower is everything man puts into it, and this everything is infinite. (37)

It is the inevitable sign. . . . This pure sign . . . it is impossible to flee from it, *because it means everything*. (33)

There is certainly no getting around the Eiffel Tower, and yet nobody sees it as a simple object, because it has become a sign, a symbol, an allegory. The pyramid, on the other hand, hidden in the bosom of the old Louvre, has not yet revealed itself as a catalyst for literary or pictorial creations. It is still only an object of curiosity or pleasure. Let us examine it and read it as a text.

Whereas the Tower is immense, massive, impressive, terrifying, inspiring awe by its sheer size and creating a sublime space, the pyramid is the image of modesty and delicacy. Made up of glass triangles and rhomboids supported by steel tubing and cables, surrounded by three attendant pyramidions and by basins, it seems to be there only to weave complex shadow figures with light. By dint of its elementary geometry, it reflects the eternal principles of knowledge and magic and symbolizes life, offering an image of synthesis in its evocation of the four elements (the water of the surrounding pools and the air, earth, and fire which go into the formation of glass). The architect, Pei, described it thus in the March 31, 1989 issue of *Le Monde*:

The pyramid's mood shifts, like the mood of Paris. . . . *It's not really architecture*, it has more to do with the *art of illusion*. The strict geometry of the design has its place in the continuity of French landscape art. (my emphasis)

But the pyramid, in this setting, is a study in discontinuity, paradox, rupture; it shocks and disconcerts, both by its shape and by the materials of which it is made. Where is the originality of this pyramid, which resembles not only Egyptian tombs and Aztec temples, but also the decorations in French public gardens of the eighteenth century? Its main material, moreover, glass, marks the

advent of modernity at the end of the nineteenth century. The pyramid thus seems somewhat removed from time, both in form and content. It might well date from the end of the nineteenth century, since glass, in association with iron or steel, characterizes the industrial, commercial age, with its railroad stations, its indoor markets, its skyscrapers, and its arcades, many of which are to be found in France to this day.

Glass can be bewitching, however. It entrances through its transparency and by its opacity, by its ability both to let things show through and be an object of contemplation. This fascination, this spectacle distilled of discontinuity, gives rise to metaphors; what might they be?

Glass does not represent, it transmits. It specializes in capture and diffusion. It becomes a messenger of light, affording entry and free play to the eye. The French word for glass, *verre*, seems somehow connected to the future stem of the verb to see, *verr*, and the pyramid puts one in mind of a huge crystal, whose facets do not break up the light (the glass, in fact, has been specially treated), but reflect the colors as they are, revealing, reflecting, and multiplying Lefuel's and Visconti's facades, playing with the sky and the light. *Verre* is also an anagram of *rêver*, to dream; by assuming all the shades of its environment, doesn't the glass invite us to get lost inside? Just what is the verr-itable nature of the pyramid? It is a looking-glass world which reflects the image of the Louvre and opens up a city under the city, an illuminated pit, placing the museum in a new light.

The pyramid, the new museum entrance, is the materialization of an act of mediation: in reality it is an *emptiness*, legitimized solely as the embodiment of a mediation, as a *highlighting of the museum*. This pyramid not only captures the eye, but represents an effort to safeguard the museum. It is thus a doubly apt metaphor for the museum itself, a place where works of art are preserved, safeguarded, and contemplated. But it cannot be reduced to the mere function of a museum entrance: it participates in the setting, the staging, the museification of this venerable royal palace. It puts the Louvre under glass, protects it, enhances the value of its contents, as do bell jars, shop windows, glass coffins. A second dimension of the pyramid is to be seen here: its participation in the *sanctification* of the Louvre, in the sanctification of the artists and of their work. Through it, the Louvre attains visibly the level of the *sacred*. This shimmer-

ing entryway evokes the idea that a museum is a shrine where artists and works of art are worshipped. Thanks to it, the museum becomes a twentieth-century cathedral.

Made of glass, the pyramid is an object and instrument of vision. It is the sign of an intercommunication, of an interactivity, of a game open to the spectator, who can act, discover for himself, and choose his own itinerary, thanks to this new entrance and the new organization of the museum which it permits. It thus symbolizes openness, pluralism, and mobility, and imparts a foretaste of the new role granted the spectator in the museum: that of an active, mobile art-lover become sightseer, investigator, creator (Dagognet 45). The pyramid participates in the housecleaning and rejuvenation which is shaking up the old Louvre, upsetting its organization and its conception and opening this national institution to question. Here is Dagognet speaking about museums:

Is there any known . . . institutional locality both more fragile and more suspect [than the museum]? Thought has been devoted to “the School,” “the Mental Institution,” “the Hospital,” “the Prison”—those centers of rational or disciplinary confinement; but if “the Museum” seems to have been neglected, it is doubtless because it symbolizes in and of itself the exercise of segregation, of academic violence and of representative ideology. Power or Society collects its trophies there, its assurance, its own values, its permanence. (45)

The pyramid is the signal for an upheaval, a reconstruction, perhaps a *deconstruction* of this august temple of the arts. I have already noted the shock produced by this pyramidal glass shape in its ancient setting of classic stone. Moreover, it disturbs the carefully preserved equilibrium of the illustrious sequence proceeding from the *Etoile* to the *Arc du Carrousel* by way of the *Arc de Triomphe*, the *Champs-Élysées*, the *Chevaux de Marly*, the *que Obélisque*, and the main walk of the *Tuileries*. The pyramid is certainly a reference to an architectural past (ancient Egypt and eighteenth-century French gardens), but this reference is undermined and frustrated. Indeed, the pyramid disturbs the alignment of this chain of monuments; not only is it off center, but it makes the misalignment conspicuous. It interrupts this line of monuments, or, etymologically speaking, this line of works devoted to the perpetuation of memory. It is dislocated, set apart from this commemorative align-

ment, from tradition; and, above all, it blocks all the old main axes and entrances of the Louvre itself: thus it upsets the dimension of the museum of the Louvre. This site, with its registered trademark, with its registered past, becomes a kind of a container to be filled. The museum retraces the history of art, which it is up to the spectator-creator to outgrow.

Traditionally, as Hubert Damisch reminds us, the museum is the scene, the instrument, the apparatus of a remembrance, the prop of a remembrance (as are arches, columns, and pyramids) (25). Surely this crowd-drawing pyramid masks the museum as much as it sanctifies it: the public can sate itself with the show it puts on without ever penetrating into the subterranean world of the Louvre. Thus the pyramid becomes an art object itself, in its transparency and opacity, and explodes the limits of the old museum. With the fountains and pools around it, the pyramid is a new place, where people meet; and create their own spectacle it is a scene of ephemeral visual encounters and pleasures. It also provides access to a shopping gallery, and connects to a parking garage as well; it therefore no longer opens into the world of art, but onto the world of consumption.

If the Eiffel Tower may be linked to modernity, to modern science and technology, to factories and the machinery of production, to a photo lab, to reproduction, the pyramid has connections with the impalpable, the imperceptible, to machinery whose appearance provides no hint of its potential for upheaval: I am referring to the computer.² Within its framework of steel tubing and cables, the pyramid creates the effect of a computer-generated digital image projected onto a historical setting; not an image with a single face, but with an infinity of potential faces. The digital image is produced by the conversion of numerical data (made up of zeros and ones) into graphic imaginary information. Reference to an existing model is unnecessary; the image is not necessarily based on or drawn from existing reality. But the digital image, unlike the optico-chemical image of photography and of motion-pictures or the optico-electronic image of television, does not exist without language (the digital language of zeros and ones):³

The synthetic image is the translation and execution of orders expressed in language. . . . It is generated directly by language, and has no existence without this language. (Couchot 48)

Similarly, the pyramid is a full-blown language which increases the complexity of the relation between spectators and the world.

Yes, the pyramid is an image, a *simulacrum* in both senses of the term: the first one, image or idol, emphasizes the sacred aspect detected above; the second, “perceptible appearance given as a reality” (*Le Petit Robert*),⁴ provides a basis for the game of to and fro between transparency and opacity, museum entrance and art object, appeal to the past and appeal to the present, seeing and dreaming.

If the tower inaugurated a new age through new techniques, the pyramid makes use of past forms and techniques in order to symbolize the world of the end of the twentieth century, the age of reproduction, of spectacle, and of the image. It is a postmodern sign insofar as it quotes historical styles and techniques in order to play with them: it re-uses the pyramid form, but removes itself from history’s commemorative chain, and if glass is used, it is not just to let light through, in mere fulfillment of purpose, as would be true in the case of a typically modern construction, but also with an eye to engendering metaphors (crystal/art object/decoration/digital image). The pyramid goes beyond its function as an entrance to take on a complexity of significations and messages, developing a game within its environment, a game in time and space, material and idea, function and metaphorization.

The Louvre is no longer the Louvre; it is first of all the pyramid; its center of interest has been displaced, and the pyramid has become its fetish. The glass of the pyramid and the pyramidions and the water in the attendant basins multiply and distort the images of the museum and the world in a game of mirrors, virtual images of an elusive reality. The museum’s format is thus from now on of an architectural nature: the Louvre adds its contribution to the list of architectural museums which includes *Beaubourg*, *La Villette*, *La Défense*, the *Musée d’Orsay* and the *Institut du Monde arabe*.

The *Musée d’Orsay* likewise has its place in a postmodern program, by virtue of its decentralized pluralism. Unlike the Eiffel Tower, which bears its creator’s name, the *Musée d’Orsay* (with the Louvre pyramid and the *Institut du Monde arabe*) seems by its very name to be characterized by a loss (or decentering) of centralizing authority: Gae Aulenti, in charge of the interior decoration and ACT architecture, as well as Laloux, the architect of the railway station put into service in 1900, are known only to a few concerned persons.⁵ On the other hand, this silence marks/opens a multiplicity of views and gives the visitors/spectators the right to look, judge, and choose

among the offering of a location and collection remarkable for their eclecticism. This museum is set up in a railway station once destined to be demolished, a building betokening modernity and the metallic architecture of the nineteenth century, a kind of cathedral of the industrial era, a “temple dedicated to energy, movement, and commerce” (Jencks, *Architecture* 321). This ancient temple of modernity has become a twentieth-century temple, a museum, a “temple dedicated to the new secular religion, the international art market, the repository of culture as luxurious spectacle” (321). Thus the postmodern double coding is established, that “combination of Modern techniques with something else (usually traditional building) in order for architecture to communicate with the public . . .” (Jencks, *What* 14).

Unlike the *Palais de Tokyo*, for example, conceived on the principle of exclusion in order to develop a certain sense of modern art, a certain taste, a single historical point of view, the *Musée d'Orsay* asserts a plurality of languages, develops a hybrid language both in its architecture and in its collections, confronting various styles over a two-century period in order to affirm the complexity of a world in which “we can't deny either the past and conventional beauty, or the present and current technical or social reality” (Jencks, *What* 19). Openness, heterogeneity, hybrid style, recognition and inclusion of various arts and their differences are the guiding principles in this museum.

The organization of the museum evinces a deep desire to establish a dialogue between the techniques and arts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The central nave with its original glass vault, flanked by two wings, suggest an almost religious character, but the use of space is a sign of the late twentieth century: panels, espaliers, and small galleries, floors and walls covered with hard ochre, bicolored limestone from Buxy open an era in which Western art from 1848 to 1914 finds spaces and light. And not academic art alone: included here are sculpture, painting, and decorative arts in all their variations and for all tastes, successes and failures, horrors and beauties. The *Musée d'Orsay* is a place of openness and the inclusion of conflicting values and points of view, and its architecture provides a range of subtle commentary on these works of art: the use of espaliers and light, for example, permits an ironic distancing from certain works. And finally, it gathers together in one place collections formerly divided among the *Jeu de Paume*, the Louvre,

and the *Palais de Tokyo*, furnishing a link between the Louvre and the *Musée d'Art Moderne*.

The *Institut du Monde arabe* stands in a very conspicuous spot in the heart of Paris, hemmed in as it is between the rigid block of the Jussieu Science Faculty and the sweeping curve of the Quai St Bernard, in close proximity to the Ile St. Louis and the Ile de la Cité and Notre-Dame cathedral. The *Institut* is composed of two wings, one of which follows the curve of the Seine's course and is cut off from the other, adjacent building, a rectangle opening onto a square courtyard on the Jussieu side. Although modern in conception, the *Institut* succeeds in fitting in and playing a role in its Parisian context: the facade along the river follows the layout of the embankment, the glass and steel of the facades are in harmony with their environment due to their silvery, blue-gray tints, the spiral of the library captures the light and offers its volumes to the gaze of passersby, and the mobile steel diaphragms facing south on the courtyard side function according to the intensity of natural light by means of a photo-electric cell.

The purpose of this *Institut* is to promote knowledge of Arab culture among the French public. This dialogue is established, not only by the library and the Arab-Islamic museum collections, drawn from the Louvre, but also by the very architecture of the place, especially by its glass facade to the south, embellished with wrought ironwork on the inside. It consists of a number of windows containing camera-like mechanisms equipped with numerous small shutters, able to block light by adjusting the aperture of the diaphragm stop. Unlike Jencks, who finds that "each of these fantastic pieces of High-Tech looks like a mandala with fifty-six tiny lenses, sixteen medium-sized openings, and a central giant camera" (*Architecture* 276), I see in these diaphragms not a mandala, but a sign of the Arabicity of the *Institut*: they echo Arabic geometric designs and are also a variation on the theme of moucharaby. A combination of tradition and high technology, the *Institut* is quite postmodern in its double code.⁶ Moreover, with its facade in perpetual motion, the spiral of its library, the glass of its walls, it is a building intent on moving and on capturing the eye, oriented toward event, re-presentation and interaction with its environment and heterogeneous cultures.

These three buildings, postmodern among others in that they "at once inscribe . . . and subvert . . . the conventions and ideologies of the dominant cultural and social forces of the twentieth-century

western world” (Hutcheon 11), affirm the plurality of contemporary society: the Arab world in the heart of Paris, the museum cum railway station as the focal point of conflicting tastes, the pyramid as both accomplice and critic of history. Finally, they propose a new role for today’s museum: the building itself becomes an art object, and the museum is not reduced to its function as a place for education and edification, putting only esthetic and historical certainties on display. It distinguishes itself by demanding an inventive and exploratory initiative on the part of the visitor, and by striving to be a place of transparency and interaction. It is nonetheless to be regretted that these museums were established in the French capital, and not in the provinces, where they might have been more open to “marginal” elements. To erect architectural objects could have helped to concretize even more the questioning of a central authority (of the political, administrative, and cultural center of France) and to affirm a decentralized pluralism. To recognize differences in ethnically, culturally, and socially more heterogeneous regions of France would have allowed a new assertion of minority rights.

Translated from the French by Karl Natanson

Notes

1. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
2. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard underlines the connection between postmodernism and the computer in these terms: “Knowledge has become the principle force of production over the last few decades . . .” (5). “The status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age” (3). “The miniaturization and commercialization of machines is already changing the way in which learning is acquired, classified, made available, and exploited. It is reasonable to suppose that the proliferation of information-processing machines is having . . . as much of an effect on the circulation of learning as did advancements in human circulation . . . and later, in the circulation of sounds and visual images . . .” (4). “The direction of new research will be dictated by the possibility of its eventual results being translatable into computer language” (4).
3. “For the last forty years the ‘leading’ sciences and technologies have had to do with language: phonology and theories of linguistics, problems of communication and cybernetics, modern theories of algebra and informatics, computers and their languages . . .” (Lyotard 3).

4. Baudrillard gives the following definition of simulacrum as opposed to representation, which by extension illustrates the relationship between the pyramid and the Eiffel Tower discussed in this paper: "non pas irréel, mais simulacre, c'est-à-dire ne s'échangeant plus jamais contre du réel, mais s'échangeant en lui-même, dans un circuit ininterrompu dont ni la référence ni la circonférence ne sont nulle part. Telle est la simulation, en ce qu'elle s'oppose à la représentation. Celle-ci part du principe d'équivalence du signe et du réel . . . La simulation part à l'inverse de l'utopie du principe d'équivalence, part de la négation radicale du signe comme valeur, part du signe comme réversion et mise à mort de toute référence. Alors que la représentation tente d'absorber la simulation en l'interprétant comme fausse représentation, la simulation enveloppe tout l'édifice de la représentation lui-même comme simulacre" 'not unreal, but a simulacrum, i.e., no longer ever being exchanged for something real, but being exchanged into itself in an uninterrupted circuit whose reference and circumference are nowhere. Such is simulation insofar as it is in contrast to representation. The latter starts from the principle of the equivalence of the sign and the real. . . . Simulation starts on the contrary from the *utopia* of the principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the reversion and execution of any reference. Whereas representation attempts to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as simulacrum' (16).

5. Orsay is the name of the man responsible for the construction of the present-day Quai Anatole-France, Charles Boucher d'Orsay, Merchant's Provost from 1700 to 1708. The museum has taken the name of the railway station which houses it, alongside the Quai Anatole-France.

6. Hutcheon: "postmodern architecture is a doubly coded form: [it is] historical and contemporary. There is no dialectic resolution or recuperation . . ." (71)

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