

Alternative Abstractions of Modernist Architecture

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Abstract

Le Corbusier and Ozenfant in *Purism* (1921) state the goal of Purist art as placing “the spectator in a state of a mathematical quality, that is, a state of an elevated order”. This paper will take the poetic possibility of abstraction in the work of “modernist” architects as a guiding thread for an investigation of an alternative modernism in the twentieth century.

If there is a modernism defined by the “universalising abstraction of technology” and the “unsituated *tabula rasa*” as pre-requisite for the creativity of the aesthetic genius, the argument will be made for an alternative modernism concerned and working with abstraction not instrumentally, but in a manner which, in making its own representation a subject for itself, gives space for a resonant creativity. The contrast will be drawn between a “figurative” and aesthetic understanding of art and architecture on the one hand; and “abstraction” as a practice/theory where

- mimesis folds back on that which is mimed, and effects it (destroying its “originality”)
- the act of mimesis speaks of that act itself, saying something of itself
- and (thus) affects the work and affects the mimesis of the work in a movement of staging

The aim will be at once to rescue abstraction from technological reduction, and to show abstraction as an ongoing theme for architecture.

Alternative Abstractions of Modernist Architecture

Two Abstractions: Purism and the International Style

Ozenfant and Le Corbusier, in their manifesto *Purism*, published in 1920 three years before *Vers Une Architecture*, state that the goal of Purist art is the placing of “the spectator in a state of a mathematical quality, that is, a state of an elevated order”. For them, the realm of art is structured as a hierarchy, and “the highest level of this hierarchy seems to us to be that special state of a mathematical sort to which we are raised, for example, by the clear perception of a great general law”. This mathematical quality is characterised as an “intellectual order”, and “should be sought amongst universal means”. In other words, Ozenfant and Le Corbusier are making a claim for the importance of an abstract order within the work of art – and also the work of architecture, which, as they say, has heretofore “most strongly induced the state of this category”. Abstraction is installed at the outset of the project of modernist architecture as the key attribute of the work (of art or architecture).

By “abstraction” I mean here a “philosophical” (ie itself abstract) notion, not an aesthetic category. The abstract, here, is that generalising movement by which the particular is categorised under a law, a universalising movement by which an intellectual order is created.

By contrast, Hitchcock and Johnson, in *The International Style; architecture since 1922*, published in 1932 to accompany the first architectural exhibition at New York’s new *Museum of Modern Art*, explicitly set out a series of *aesthetic* principles for a modernist style of architecture which they contrast with both the *individualistic* styles of the previous century and the “functionalism” of some early 20th century work. Three principles define the aesthetics of the international modernist style: firstly: “architecture as volume”, in contrast to an architecture of “mass” or “static solidity”; secondly: “regularity”, where an aesthetic ordering emphasises the underlying regularity of the structural grid, characterised as *per se* economical in nature; thirdly: “the avoidance of arbitrary applied decoration”.

Hitchcock would later, in his post-script of 1951, question the inclusion of the third principle, which he considers latterly to be “a matter of taste rather than principle”. (A better reason to omit it would have been that it follows from the first two principles, and thus is not axiomatic.) He also emphasises at that time the flexibility of the stylistic framework they perceived and established in 1932; since the “principles are few and broad” they provide a “frame of potential growth” rather than “a fixed and crushing mould”, according to Hitchcock.

Hitchcock and Johnson’s pamphlet does exactly what it claims to do. It defines a *style* of architecture and gives examples of it. It defines this style in a series of clearly articulated *aesthetic* axia. Allow me to highlight my own pleonasm by stating the superfluity of the word *aesthetic* in my previous sentence: *since* it is a question in the pamphlet of *style*, the axia must *per se* be of the aesthetic type; and *vice versa*. The provision of a series of examples of the international style, taken from the MOMA exhibition, is entirely feasible and consistent with the stylistic and aesthetic concerns of the book; each photograph is neatly captioned with short critique which places the particular building within the *genus*, subsuming each individual instance of the style under general laws - or, at least, attempting to do so.

I like this one the best: Jeanneret and Le Corbusier’s *De Mandrot Villa* of 1931, where the critique tersely states:

“COMBINATION OF MASONRY AND ISOLATED POST CONSTRUCTION. NON-SUPPORTING WALL SECTIONS ARE OF STUCCO OR GLASS. BADLY PLACED WOODEN FLY-SCREEN FRAMES MAR THE FENESTRATION”

No mention that the building's "regularity" is entirely unrelated to any pre-conceived structural system, thus breaking the second axiom; nor that the massive masonry walls, very heavily articulated in plan and visible as "decorative" façade elements entirely ignores the first axiom of the purity of an architecture of "volume".

Or this, Mies' Weissenhofsiedlung building, where the authors at least acknowledge that the building breaks the rule of "lack of axial symmetry" – although they excuse this as reliant on "general regularity", not on "axial emphasis"; their comment on the plan, however, stretches credibility to the limit. To my eye at least each flat is virtually the same, with minor variations to provide more or fewer bedrooms; this seems to Hitchcock and Johnson perhaps a little too functional, and the claim is made that "there is great variety in the planning of the individual apartments".

But whatever the failure of particular examples (would a building which faithfully adhered to them not inevitably be a failure?), the author's intellectual effort remains strong; they have created a set of general laws which articulate the particular in the light of an overarching abstract structure or project. Their work – the exhibition and the book – displays of itself an abstract and critical moment, philosophically speaking.

Further, I think it is at least arguable that both the definition of the style and the examples they give of it (whatever their failings) are *aesthetically* abstract. To take up the classical dichotomy between the figurative and the abstract, one could argue on a certain level that the international style is indeed "abstract" in nature. This in contrast to previous architectural styles which had been all too figurative in their imitation of pre-existing architectural languages more or less distant in temporal or spatial terms. (We might today ask what happens when a pre-existing abstract architectural style, such as modernism, begins to be uncritically imitated.)

Hitchcock and Johnson's work situates the question of abstraction as follows:

- a) on the one hand, their effort as documenters and art historians engages critically with existing works of architecture and, in a process of abstraction, creates a set of general laws, an intellectual order, which enables them to define a "style"
- b) on the other hand, this style – an avowedly aesthetic category according to the authors – has the aesthetic appearance of abstraction. A universalising abstract style which, by avoiding the figurative concerns of local or traditional architecture, befits the name "international"

Their definition of modernist architecture is therefore operating at a different plane – at a different intellectual level of abstraction – to the Purism of Ozenfant and Le Corbusier. For the latter, the work of art and architecture *itself* has indeed an abstract quality about it; but this abstract quality is not essentially on the level of style or the aesthetic visual qualities of a work. The abstract quality rests instead in the inherence in the work *itself* of a "great general law", which they characterise as the "excitement of an intellectual order", and which they contrast to the language of the preceding schools of aesthetics "nearly all of which considered only the release of the sensations of immediate feeling".

Paradoxically, this concern with an abstract order *within* the work bespeaks a work of art which will not necessarily be of itself "abstract" in visual terms, as we can see and as is made clear by the Purist critique of an art based on primary, geometrical sensations, which would according to the manifesto remain denuded of sufficient human resonance.

There is thus a symmetrical counter-position between Ozenfant/Le Corbusier and Hitchcock and Johnson:

- a) on the one hand, the abstract process of establishing a general law is used to define a *style* of architecture whose *appearance* is abstract, not figurative. This is the international style

- b) on the other hand, a work of art which we can call “great” – taking a lead from architecture – is one which *of itself* has an abstract intellectual order, but which does not *necessarily* result in an abstract visual aspect. Thus says Purism

Greenberg’s High Modernism

Greenberg claims at the start of his 1960 essay *Modernist Painting* that modernism by that time covered “almost the whole of what is today alive in our culture”. He defines what he sees as the essence of modernism insofar as it relates to this wide field; and then goes on to relate that essence to the specific discipline of painting.

The definition of modernism is, for Greenberg, straightforward and succinctly put. I will quote at a little length:

“I identify Modernism with the intensification, almost the exacerbation, of this self-critical tendency that began with the philosopher Kant. Because he was the first to criticise the means itself of criticism, I conceive of Kant as the first real Modernist.

The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence. Kant used logic to establish the limits of logic, and while he withdrew much from its old jurisdiction, logic was left all the more secure in what there remained to it.

The self-criticism of Modernism grows out of, but is not the same thing as, the criticism of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment criticised from the outside, the way criticism in its accepted sense does; Modernism criticizes from the inside, through the procedures themselves of that which is being criticised,”

For Greenberg, the self-critical moment is the essence of modernism, taken from philosophy and applied across all areas of human activity, including the arts. Post-enlightenment, the arts run the risk of becoming mere entertainment, but were rescued from this fate by becoming of value “in their own right”. Because it was a question of their *own* character, rather than a relation to, say, an overarching pre-enlightenment cosmic order which gave them validity, the necessity of a focus on the specific character of each individual art became, in Greenberg’s argument, vital. Greenberg acknowledges that this constitutes a narrowing down of the realm to which a specific art might relate, but avers that this is necessary in order that the “processes of that area (be) all the more certain”.

In respect of this narrowing down onto the specific character of an art, in a self-critical moment, Greenberg then states, baldly and unequivocally:

“It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium.”

It is on the word “medium” that my discussion hinges. Not the only the only one this afternoon – Session 9 [Mark Godfrey and Chris Kul-Want] is entitled *Medium Matters Today*, where more than one of the speakers is addressing this very issue of Greenberg’s “medium”. His use of the word is the classical art-historical one; he means the *materials used in producing the work of art*. Thus in the sentence I have just quoted, the question of the unique nature of the work is posited in materialist terms. And his use of the word “medium” is unsullied by any equivocation or ambiguity. For his definition of what I am calling “high modernist” painting inverts what he claims previous generations had viewed as painting’s limitations – namely, its materiality, constituted by “the flat surface, the shape of the support, the

properties of the pigment” – and installs these as positive factors to be celebrated, openly acknowledged, and used so as to enable “art to call attention to art”.

The modernist painting is thus:

- self-critical
- focused on its own concerns, gaining thereby a self-legitimacy
- respectful of and concerned with its own materiality

The extremity of this self-validation of the modernist work is emphasised more strongly in Greenberg’s earlier essay from 1939, *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*, where he states that:

“the avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms”

But it is here that he does display an - albeit unacknowledged - ambiguity. The paragraph runs further:

“But...the very values in the name of which he [the poet/artist] invokes the absolute are relative values, the values of aesthetics. And so he turns out to be imitating, not God – and here I use “imitate” in its Aristotelian sense – but the disciplines and processes of art and literature themselves. This is the genesis of the “abstract”. In turning away from subject matter of common experience, the poet or artist turns in upon the *medium* of his own *craft*. The non- representational or “abstract,” if it is to have aesthetic validity, cannot be arbitrary and accidental, but must stem from obedience to some worthy constraint or original. This constraint, once the world of common, extraverted experience has been renounced, can only be found in the very process or disciplines by which art and literature have already imitated the former. These themselves become the matter of art and literature. If, to continue with Aristotle, all art and literature are imitation, then what we have here is the *imitation of imitating*” (my emphasis)

Now, in evoking Aristotle’s definition of the arts as imitation, and in speaking of the imitation of imitation – or, as I should like to put it, the *mimesis of mimesis* – Greenberg calls to mind an entirely other meaning to the word “medium” than the specific technical and materialist art-historical term for the artist’s craft materials – namely, medium as “an agency that articulates meaning” (see the abstracts to Session 9 of this conference).

He calls it to mind, but promptly erases it in favour of the materialist interpretation of this self-criticality.

This erasure is sufficiently complete that the issue of the imitation of imitation does not receive a mention in the later *Modernist Painting* article from which I previously quoted.

Mimesis of Mimesis

I wish to argue for an alternative modernism, specifically in architecture but related to topical concerns in the other arts; an alternative which does not erase this issue.

Returning briefly to Ozenfant and Le Corbusier’s definition of great art as that which of itself has an abstract intellectual order, my thesis is that modernism, alternatively defined in a manner unaligned with questions of style, visual aspect or aesthetics, is that series of works which, in self-critical but nonetheless not solely self-referential fashion represents to us the subtle movement of its own mimesis.

I shall take it as read and without further discussion that architecture is acknowledged as mimetic. The exact nature of that mimesis varies from the

extreme of typology on the one hand through to the perhaps more felicitous “mimesis of exemplary situations”.

That work which makes its mimesis an issue for itself, holds within itself and represents to us its own general law – namely, the general law of mimesis. In that respect, this representation of mimesis adheres to the Purist dictum that the work should itself present a general law and should generate the “excitement of an intellectual order”. It is thus abstract, spoken *not* “aesthetically” but rather intellectually. And this intellectual abstraction is therefore released from (although not divorced from) an aesthetic notion of abstraction typified by the flat blankness of the high modernist canvas. Thus Sugimoto’s Vermeer, in articulating the abstract structure of representation, appears to be and indeed is on one level “figurative”; but on another level remains resonantly abstract in the “Purist” sense.

The significance of Jeanneret and Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye lies not only in its abstract appearance; nor indeed in the skill, novelty and sheer panache of its architectural promenade; nor in its filmic quality; nor its ability to be overcome by a decayed sensuality that would proclaim an other architecture; nor yet its explicit references to an architecture stretched out between earth and sky embodied by the basement and the solarium linked by the enlightening movement of the spiral stair. It articulates, of course, all of these things and many more. But beyond these articulations the work also takes all these mimetic moves and represents them to us, offering them up in a more or less explicit staging of its own representational concerns.

Mimesis, conventionally spoken as synonymous with “imitating”, presupposes a prior existence which the mimetic image mimes. To state it in imagistic terms; *first* the thing itself, *then* the image, the mime, of it. Where, however, the mimesis itself becomes woven into this fabric, the conventional relationship between that which is mimed (the “original”) and that which does the miming (the “work”, the “image”) becomes disrupted in a sort of movement *en abyme* [the heraldic name for an image which contains an image of itself, and thus onto infinity]. This means that the mimesis folds back on that which it mimes, and disrupts and destroys it. It effects it; that is, that which is mimed is strangely brought into being; the cause of the thing which we thought was original is thus instead that which is commonly thought of as secondary – namely, that which does the miming. The originality of that which is getting mimed is destroyed. In architectural terms this means that if, for instance, architecture is a mimesis of situation, then that situation is itself destroyed and re-made by the mimesis that architecture effects, since it will give new and other alleatory possibilities in a resonant creativity between the work and the destroyed/renewed/enriched situation. The task of architecture would be to question the supposedly pre-existing order at the same time as reflecting it.

In this art of mimesis speaking of itself, it acts self-critically to problematise itself. In speaking of itself, of its own mimesis, it poses not only the question about the nature of architecture in general terms; but, at the limit, poses the question: is *this* architecture? The work does not rest content in the surety of its own position within an architectural canon, and this is perhaps why on the one hand, Corbusier would feel the need in the 1920s for an architecture radical in its abstract appearance, but to Hitchcock and Johnson’s confusion did not in the 1930s. It might also say something about current concerns with the “everyday” and the “ordinary”; these concerns are effective as a questioning strategy because in the current context this still poses a question about architecture in general and about the nature of specific pieces as architecture.

Mimesis staged. The work says: look, here, you will see my production. The act of mimesis affects the work. It does not effect it – mimesis is not the *cause* whereby the work of architecture comes into being; it is something, rather, which has an influence over the work from within the work.

There is thus a self-referentiality and self-generation occurring which, because it occurs at the same time as the mimetic act, cannot be characterised as a hermetic moment; on the contrary, the mimesis opens the work to the outside whilst taking

this outside not as a given, not as pre-existing, but as that which is susceptible to the chance of the new. The self-generational character of the work is its only possibility to be itself new, since without that autonomy it would be reliant upon that which pre-exists it; and in its newness it gives the place where the new can occur.

These concerns are ongoing in the most interesting continuations of an alternative modernism; but are also evinced in pre-modern work where the *abstract structure*, the general law I am referring to, can exist within the appearance of a figurative architecture. Take your pick, here, between Hawksmore and Adjei.

Let me end with this enigmatic building; juxtaposed with this staging; and this framing.

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