POSTMODERN TIMES

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The scene has become so familiar that its novelty has long been forgotten: Charlie Chaplin frantically struggles to tighten bolts on an assembly line whose speed steadily increases until everything breaks down. Perhaps it is because we have become accustomed to viewing Chaplin's dehumanizing factory through the comic eyes of Lucy, who tries to keep up with candies on an endless conveyor belt, that we tend to overlook the critical edge of *Modern Times*. Nor do we usually recognize the remarkable range of Chaplin's social commentary. From factory, to asylum, to prison, *Modern Times* portrays a world in which everything seems to be spinning out of control.

The very familiarity of the world that Chaplin projects obscures some of his most prescient insights. The film opens by explicitly focusing on the question of time. The first image is a clock ticking down to 6:00 am the start of a new work day. As the credits draw to a close, the full-screen clock gives way to a herd of sheep, which, in turn, is displaced by a crowd of workers rushing toward the factory where they spend the day. The mechanization of labor required the synchronization of human activity. When Chaplin falls into the gears that run the factory, he becomes quite literally a cog in the machine of industrial production.

Modern Times first appeared in 1926 two years after Walter Benjamin published "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." It is as if Chaplin produced the work of art that Benjamin theorized. Though more intrigued by photography than film, Benjamin was, nonetheless, keenly aware of the significance of Chaplin's art. Commenting on the effectiveness of Chaplin's social criticism, Benjamin writes:

> Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art. The reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into the progressive reaction toward a Chaplin movie. The progressive reaction is characterized by

the direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert. Such fusion is of great social significance.[1]

While Benjamin's comment is characteristically insightful, *Modern Times* is progressive in ways that not even he realized. In the midst of the factory, with its mechanical means of reproduction, Chaplin inserts a device that utilizes an electronic mode of reproduction. From behind the glass door of his office, the president of the company directs his workers by projecting his image in real time throughout the factory. When adjustments need to be made or workers are not producing fast enough, the boss's image suddenly appears on large screens scattered throughout the factory from which instructions are issued and orders are handed down. No longer film but not yet television, this electronic device allows the president to be present *virtually* everywhere at once. Workers, who have become prostheses for machines, are unable to escape the panoptical gaze of management.

While modernism is inseparably bound to the mechanisms of industrial production, postmodernism is an extension of electronic telecommunications technology. Chaplin could not, of course, have predicted the extraordinary revolution that has been brought about by the progressive shift from mechanical to electronic modes of production and reproduction. Nevertheless, the remarkable interplay he establishes between the assembly line and something approximating broadcast television anticipates the advent of what has come to be known as postmodernism. Furthermore, by indicating the way in which modes of production and reproduction transform structures of temporality, Chaplin implicitly suggests one of the most important points of difference between modernism and postmodernism. The question of this difference remains a matter of time.

If we are honest, we must admit that it is no longer clear whether theology has a future. More precisely, it is no longer clear whether theology has a future that involves anything other than an impossible repetition of the past. What *is* clear is that *if* theology is to have a future, it is necessary to develop a far more sophisticated understanding of our present cultural condition. And yet, one searches in vain for careful theological analyses of literature, music, painting, and architecture, to say nothing of photography, film, television, and video. It is as though

theologians who resist modernity accept the modernist doctrine of the autonomy of different forms of cultural expression. As a result, theology all too often becomes either irrelevant or reactionary.

In an effort to force theology to confront a world it apparently would prefer to ignore, I will attempt to articulate some of the theological implications of our postmodern times. While it is obviously impossible to resolve the questions that continue to swirl around postmodernism, a consideration of the problem of temporality can, help to distinguish two competing strands of postmodernism and to contextualize them in relation to major alternatives that have governed theological debate during the nineteenth century.

Initially coined to describe an architectural style characterized by historical eclecticism and ironic ornamentalism, the term "postmodernism" has rapidly been expanded to cover a broad range of social and cultural phenomena. According to Lyotard, "postmodernism" does not merely designate a particular architectural style or philosophical stance but defines our very cultural condition at the end of the millennium. He contends that postmodernism involves the breakdown of the metanarratives that have governed the lives of selves and societies since at least the Enlightenment. This dissolution of the narrative quality of experience issues in profound spiritual, social, and political dislocation. In the absence of an overarching framework, questions of meaning and motivation become unanswerable and the problem of legitimation becomes irresolvable. Without an intelligible past and a meaningful future, the passing moment of present experience becomes all-consuming. It is precisely such temporal dissociation that Jameson takes to be definitive of postmodernism. "As temporal continuities break down," he argues, "the experience of the present becomes powerfully, overwhelmingly vivid and 'material': the world comes *before* the schizophrenic with heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious and oppressive charge of affect, glowing with hallucinatory energy."[2] Such personal and social dissolution, according to Jameson, is attributable to the socio-economic mechanisms of consumer capitalism in which commodities are fetishized and exchange value supplants use value.

Jameson's foreshortened historical perspective prevents him from realizing that his analysis of postmodernism repeats, without essentially revising, Kierkegaard's critique of modernism. Furthermore, Jameson's ideological bias blinds him to recognizing

the *theological* implications of postmodernism. It is hardly an exaggeration to insist that the debate between postmodernists and modernists reenacts Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel in the context of twentieth century philosophy, literature, religion, and art.

Hegel's speculative system is the metanarrative of metanarratives in which modern philosophy reaches closure. The heart of Hegel's position is the dialectic of identity and difference. Through his logical rendering of the principle of inner teleology, which Kant articulates in the Third Critique, Hegel defines the structure of self-reflexivity in which identity and difference are mutually constitutive. Self-reflexivity is not only an epistemological axiom but is an ontological principle. Hegel insists that his speculative onto-logic involves nothing more than the philosophical translation of the correlative Christian doctrines of the incarnation and the trinity. Within this scheme, the logos of thought and being is the structure of self-reflexivity that defines both divine and human selfconsciousness. So understood, Hegel's system is thoroughly *logocentric*.

If expressed in terms of twentieth-century structuralism, the self-reflexive logocentrism and logocentric self-reflexivity of Hegel's system must be understood both synchronically and diachronically. Synchronically, the principle of self-referentiality defines the eternal structure that grounds the determinate being of any entity and delineates the contours of every concept. Diachronically, the principle of self-reflexivity reveals the unchanging structure of the stages of development through which individuals and societies must pass in order to reach fulfilment. Though all reality is constituted by the structure of self-reflexivity, this foundational principle only becomes transparent when human selfconsciousness reaches fulfilment. With the emergence of absolute knowledge, Hegel maintains, temporal dispersion is transcended as past and future are integrated in the eternal presence of the present. In this all-encompassing moment, is and ought become one and, therefore, history comes to an end.

Kierkegaard's unsystematic philosophical fragments represent an ironic, even a parodic reading of Hegel. The interrelated issues upon which the debate between Hegel and Kierkegaard turns are time and the self. From Kierkegaard's perspective, Hegel's logocentric speculation negates the significance of temporality and abstracts from the specificities of

human existence. To counter Hegel's speculative dialectic, Kierkegaard elaborates an existential dialectic comprised of three stages: the aesthetic, ethical, and religious, which are defined by alternative modalities of temporality and, correspondingly, contrasting structures of subjectivity.

For our purposes, Kierkegaard's analysis of aestheticism is of particular interest. The aesthetic stage of existence is comprised of two contrasting poles: immediacy and reflection. While insisting that the modern era as a whole is essentially aesthetic, Kierkegaard associates alternative aesthetic tendencies with certain artistic, philosophical, and theological styles. The religious romanticism of Schleiermacher and the romantic irony of Schlegels are characteristic of aesthetic immediacy, and the philosophical speculation of Hegel and his Danish followers is typical of reflective aestheticism. Though representing alternative theological, philosophical and religious approaches, both immediacy and reflection have as their aim union with that which is taken to be real or absolute.

The word "aesthetic" derives from the Greek *aisthetikos*, which means "pertaining to sense perception." While many modern writers, artists, and critics follow Kant by associating aesthetics with that branch of philosophy that presents a theory of the beautiful and the fine arts, Kierkegaard expands the notion of the aesthetic to describe a style of life defined by a longing for, or absorption in sensual immediacy. In the first volume of *Either-Or*, he develops examples of aesthetic immediacy ranging from the sensuous erotic genius paradigmatically represented by Don Juan to the modern-day everyman whom Heidegger, one century later, dubs *das Man*. For Don Juan and his modern and postmodern counterparts, the essence of experience is the enjoyment of the passing moment. Anything that distracts from the pleasurable immersion in the here and now is assiduously avoided. In a certain sense, reflection negates immediacy by introducing self-consciousness into the seemingly uninterrupted flow of sensuality. With the capacity to reflect, distinctions can be drawn within the flux of sensation and between the subject and the object of cognition. Such distinctions, however, are as fleeting as the sensations they arrest. The goal of reflection is perfect knowledge in which the *difference* between subjectivity and objectivity is erased through the perfect union of the self and the absolute. This union, which is

an inverse repetition of the moment of sensuous immediacy, realizes the *nunc stans* in which presence is undisturbed by absence.

In what follows, I will appropriate Kierkegaard's analysis of aestheticism to describe modernism and what I will label modernist postmodernism. Through a consideration of examples drawn from painting and architecture, I will proceed to define the intricate interrelation of these two cultural moments. Finally, I will describe an alternative postmodernism, which more closely approximates Kierkegaard's religious stage of existence, and opens the possibility for a new theological language.

It is not only contemporary philosophy that is preoccupied with the linguistic turn. From the theology of Barth to the drama of Beckett, from the poetry of Stevens to the music of Cage, from the anthropology of Levi-Strauss to the psychoanalysis of Lacan, the question of language pervades cultural theory and praxis throughout this century. Paradoxically, however, the more language is investigated, the less transparent it becomes. Nor is the question of language merely linguistic *sensu strictissimo*. Within the domain of the visual arts, for example, the problem of language takes the form of a sustained interrogation of the nature and limits of representation. What does representation represent? How does representation re-present? When rephrased in semiotic terms, the question becomes: Within the overall structure of the sign, what is the relationship between the signifier and the signified? To pose this query is to acknowledge that the lucidity of signs has disappeared and, thus, representation has become problematic. Far from providing access to the signified, signifiers all too often seem to obscure rather than reveal. When signifiers become veils instead of windows, there seem to be at least three ways to resolve the problem of representation: 1. Erase signifiers in order to discover the signified; 2. Collapse the signified into a play of signifiers, which refers to nothing beyond themselves; 3. Accept the impenetrability of the veil of appearances and admit the unknowability of the true and the inaccessibility of the real. While the first alternative defines the strategy of many leading modern painters and architects, the second option defines the strategy of what is commonly known as postmodernism. I defer consideration of the third alternative for the moment.

Though few modern painters and architects were directly familiar with the complexities of nineteenth-century German idealism, the philosophical and theological principles informing

many of their aesthetic theories and practices bear a striking similarity to the fundaments of Hegelian philosophy. The two primary conduits through which these speculative ideas entered the mainstream of aesthetic modernism were the theosophical musings of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and the anthroposophical writings of Rudolf Steiner. While differing in important but subtle ways, theosophy and anthroposophy present what is, in effect, a popularized version of philosophical idealism according to which the world of appearances is grounded in an underlying structure that constitutes the eternally present absolute. The goal of human striving is to achieve union with the absolute by penetrating or stripping away the realm of appearances. In Hegelian terms, this strategy represents the movement toward universality by the negation of particularity. In the semiotic terms defined above, signifiers must be erased in order to create the possibility of *direct* access to and union with the transcendental signified, which is both the real and constitutes truth itself.

Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Le Corbusier, among others, were deeply influenced by theosophical doctrine. For Mondrian, the absolute was the universal geometric structure that provides the ground of being. Through his non-objective paintings, which were usually executed in black and white or primary colors, he thought it was possible to wipe away the appearances that obscure the absolute structure of the rear. Kandinsky's abstract forms and color theory were borrowed from theosophic doctrine according to which artist representations have the capacity to engender spiritual dispositions. Le Corbusier shares Mondrian and Kandinsky's theosophical faith and idealistic convictions. The blank whiteness and austere geometricism of his buildings express a purist aesthetic in which the real is identified with abstract structure. Never accepting art for art's sake, Mondrian, Kandinsky, Le Corbusier and many of their contemporaries and followers, saw art as providing something like what Schiller described as an "aesthetic education," which would renew humankind spiritually and, in this way, prepare the way for something like the arrival of the kingdom of God on earth. Even though the absolute is eternally present, the experience of it must be opened by the presence of the work of art. From this point of view, art and architecture assume the mantle of religion in works that bear no manifest trace of traditional religious art. The course of avant-garde art throughout the first half of this century is marked by an

increasing dematerialization, which, for many artists, was the distinctive mark of spiritualization. By the 1960s and 1970s, this movement reached its logical conclusion in minimalism and conceptualism. Reversing Hegel's translation of the artistic and religious the *Vorstellung* into the philosophical *Begriff.* the material *oeuvre d'art* disappears in an idea or concept.

The spirituality and idealism that inspire much of the greatest art in our century could not be sustained. In the hands of epigones, lofty ideals give way to stylistic imitation contrived to achieve commercial success. Art that originally had been motivated by political criticism and social idealism became the preferred style of corporate capitalism. The abstraction and non-objectivity that modernists tend to regard as essential issue in an art is, for many of its critics, insensitive to and uninvolved with the concrete dilemmas of individual life and social existence. Echoing Kierkegaard's analysis of reflective aestheticism, artists and architects disenchanted with the abstractions of modernism called for a return to the materiality and temporality that are the inescapable conditions of human life. The form that this protest took was a return of figuration and ornamentation in pop art and postmodern architecture.

Robert Venturi's much-heralded call for a shift away from the elitism of International Style and turn to the populism of vernacular architecture was, of course, anticipated by pop art. In the early work of Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and others, figure returns in painting with a vengeance. When figure reemerges, however, it returns with an important difference. The image no longer refers to objects or a world other than, or outside the work of art. Johns, for example, paints and sculpts signs that are, quite literally, *signs* — targets, flags, beer cans, light bulbs, etc. In these works, the figure is the figure of a figure, the image of an image, or again, in semiotic terms, the sign of a sign. Through this endless play of signs, the transcendental signified virtually disappears.

The play of signs that Rauschenberg and Johns initiate becomes riotous in pop art and postmodern architecture. Though not explicitly theorized for several years, the practice of pop art and postmodern architecture involves a strategy of appropriation that presupposes a thorough-going rejection of the modern avant-garde's obsession with originality and fetishizing of the new. Implicitly elaborating Nietzsche's insistence that "there are no facts, only

interpretations," artists from Johns and Warhol to David Salle and Cindy Sherman, as well as architects from Venturi and Charles Moore to Philip Johnson and Michael Graves contend that everything is always already encoded. What we take to be "real" is actually an image or sign constructed to erase its imaginary status. The original, in other words, is derivative; the primary is secondary. Since the real is forever encoded, the sign is always the sign of a sign and the image is inevitably the image of an image. The artistic tactic of appropriation does nothing more than make this unavoidable condition explicit.

To underscore the importance of these developments, it is helpful to situate these aesthetic tendencies culturally, philosophically, and theologically. There is a noteworthy connection between the aesthetics of postmodernism and post-industrial capitalism. This relation is becoming increasingly complex as the electronic network in which we are entangled steadily expand with the exponential growth of the so-called information society. In a certain sense, post-industrial consumer capitalism represents a parodic realization of the avant-garde's dream of transforming society into a work of art. The dematerialization of the real prefigured in modern art and architecture is being "concretely" actualized in electronic culture. In the postmodern world, reality is not only mediated but, more important, is mediaized. Ours is a world in which media constitute the real. This is the condition that Jean Baudrillard describes as the "precession of the simulacrum." The simulacrum is an imitation for which there is no original. Whatever appears to be original is actually a citation with erased quotation marks; whatever seems real is an artifact that represses its artificiality. In the postmodern culture of the simulacrum, *there is nothing outside the image*.

The apparently frivolous play of postmodernism appears to be worlds apart from rigors of nineteenth-century idealistic philosophy and austerity of abstract painting and modern architecture. There are, however, important similarities that are easily overlooked. What is usually described as postmodernism is an *idealism of the image*. When the real becomes an image, the image becomes real. In the absence of any exteriority, difference and otherness disappear in a play of the same. If understood in this way, the postmodern play of the signifier reinscribes Hegel's speculative idealism in the register of the imaginary. The self-

reflexivity of the Hegelian concept is refigured in the self-reflexivity of the postmodern image. By bringing together our previous remarks on the socio-economic conditions of postmodernism with the recognition of the latent idealism of the image, it becomes possible to argue that the wiring of the world through which reality is dematerialized is *something like* the "material" embodiment of Hegelian *Geist*.

From Kierkegaard to Hegel and back again. For postmodernism, as for modernism, the privileged time is the *present*. The apparent return of the historical in postmodern architecture, as well as other artistic and literary practices, might seem to render this claim questionable. The postmodernist, however, approaches history ironically in order to put *historical* reference into the service of *present* enjoyment. As I have suggested, postmodern aestheticism exemplifies Kierkegaard's immediate aesthetic form of life. When the real is absorbed in an imaginary flux, experience loses its coherence and continuity; everything becomes scattered in a decentered play of signs from which there is no exit.

If approached from a theological perspective, this style of postmodernism is the aesthetic expression of the death of God. The death of God theology took shape during the very years in which pop art and postmodern architecture enjoyed their broadest appeal. As its leading proponent, Thomas Altizer makes clear, the death of God theology involves an Hegelian critique of the Kierkegaardianism inherent in the neo-orthodoxy of Barth and Bultmann. The God who dies in Altizer's theology is the God who is other — wholly other and radically different. Altizer insists that this death is actually the full realization of the divine in which the wholly other empties itself in the historical and cultural process in such a way that the absolute is totally *present* here and now. The death of God theology involves a realized eschatology that construes the present cultural moment as the *telos* of the cosmo-historical process. When the divine is totally present in the present, what is, is what ought to be. It can be argued that the death of God is the disappearance of the transcendental signified in a play of cultural signs that appears to be absolutely real. In the absence of anything other than what is, there *is* *nothing* to fear — and nothing for which to hope. Ideality and reality become one in the postmodern world of simulation. Ironically, the utopia of which religious prophets and idealistic

artists and architects have long dreamed is actualized in the culture of the simulacrum. For many the realization of this dream is a nightmare. If what is, is not what ought to be, how can we promote critique and sponsor resistance in a world absorbed in appearances?

There is alternative postmodernism a postmodernism that is not an extension of modernism but that calls into question the very foundation of modernism and its extension in modernist postmodernism. This version of postmodernism is often labeled post-structuralism or deconstruction. Though usually confused with what I have described as modernist postmodernism, poststructural postmodernism represents a significant departure from the trajectory of modernism. In ways that are too tangled to be adequately unraveled in this context, post-structuralism can be understood as a sustained critique of Hegel in which many of Kierkegaard's misgivings are reformulated in a contemporary idiom. As a result of the seminal readings of Hegel developed by Alexandre Kojève and Jean Hyppolite, several generations of French philosophers, artists, and critics have interpreted Hegel as a proto-structuralist and structuralism as latter-day Hegelianism. In this reading, the problem with both Hegelianism and structuralism is that they tend toward totalism by privileging identity at the expense of difference. For people who lived through twentieth-century totalitarianisms of the right as well as the left, the repression of altarity and consumption of otherness is an issue that exceeds the bounds of philosophy. What unites writers as different as Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Kristeva, Irigaray, Cixous, and de Certeau is the conviction that our psycho-social survival depends upon the persistent cultivation of differences, which create the possibility of resisting the totalizing systems and structures threatening to consume us.

If we are to avoid the mistake of confusing this version of postmodernism with modernist postmodernism, it is important to understand the precise contours of difference and otherness. The difference that resists totalization is no ordinary difference but is more radically different than the difference that is the opposite of identity. If, for example, we follow Derrida, *différance* is not *a* difference but is a "quasi-transcendental," which is the condition of the possibility of every difference and all identity. *Différance* or, as I prefer, altarity does not exist as such; nor does it not not exist. It is neither present nor absent. Neither origin nor ground,

Diffèrance "is" that in and through which what is, is and what is not, is not. Never present, altarity is always already past and, thus, is, in a certain sense, always yet to come. Like Freud's primal scene that never actually took place, altarity approaches without ever arriving.

Within the space or spacing of altarity, the issue remains time. If postmodernism is not merely an extension of modernism, then the time that is its space is other than the present. Indeed, the temporality of *diffèrance* is incomprehensible within the terms of modernism and modernist postmodernism. The timing of this different difference dispels the dream of presence that haunts what Heidegger labels the western onto-theological tradition. This "outside of time in time" is the *exteriority* that modernism and modernist postmodernism not only ignore but are constructed to repress. Since the present (time) and presence (space) inevitably imply something that can never be present, they are forever incomplete. The *hic et nunc* is never totally present here and now. The dislocation of presence and the present exposes every realized eschatology as a violent repression of that which nonetheless never goes away.

Post-structuralists's rejection of utopian dreams should not obscure an important point upon which they agree with modernist postmodernists. From both perspectives, originality is impossible because the origin, which is taken to be real, is always missing or is never present as such. The conclusions drawn from this lack, however, differ significantly. As we have seen, modernist postmodernists interpret the ostensible absence of the real as the lack of what we never had in the first place. The real is a chimera fabricated to make us believe that there is something beyond the play of simulacra. Once we have been disabused of this illusion, we are free to enjoy the passing moment. When what is, is what ought to be, there is need for neither critique nor resistance. For post-structural postmodernists, the absence of the real is the trace of a lack that can never be overcome. This lack is no simple absence but is the elusive margin of difference that allows appearances to appear and disappear. Since a nonabsent absence repeatedly disrupts the present and defers the enjoyment of the presence, what is, is never what ought to be. Consequently, critique and resistance are not only possible but unavoidable.

In ways that are not immediately obvious, the issue of critique returns us to Kierkegaard's theological preoccupations. Far from an

irrelevant supplement to ethico-political concerns, transcendence is the notion or quasi-notion that makes both criticism and resistance possible. As long as there is something else or something other, what is can never exhaust what might be. In an effort to name the unnameable Kierkegaard frequently substitutes "the absolutely different," "absolute heterogeneity," and "the infinitely and qualitatively different" for the word "God."

In these puzzling terms, Kierkegaard is struggling to formulate something like the different difference evoked by Derrida's neologism *différance*. The problem for Kierkegaard is that he thinks the only alternative to the both/and of Hegel's speculative logic is the either/or of a logic that presupposes the principle of non-contradiction. What Kierkegaard does not discern is the strange logic   if, indeed, it is logic   of neither/nor. But the *style* of his writings indicates that he suspects a third alternative that is *neither* both/and *nor* either/or. Kierkegaard describes the style of his most important works as "indirect communication." Indirection is not simply an aesthetic choice but is necessitated by the commitment to communicate something that resists communication. What is "infinitely and qualitatively different" or "absolute heterogeneity" cannot be represented and thus can be neither described nor defined. The best for which we can hope is to trace the after-effect of that which is forever elusive in and through the folds, faults and fissures of language. The dilemma for the Jewish Derrida is strictly parallel to the predicament of the Protestant Kierkegaard: To speak the unspeakability of altarity. Since *différance* and God are never present as such, they cannot be re-presented. In an effort to say the unsayable or write the unwriteable, Derrida devises strategies of indirection that irritate and frustrate many of his critics.' These linguistic innovations, however, are neither frivolous nor useless. To the contrary, through the play of signs Derrida stages a performative utterance whose failure is the only success for which we can hope in a world that knows neither certainty nor security.

Post-structuralism raises difficult questions for artists and architects. It has long been fashionable to view painting and architecture in linguistic terms. Since post-structuralism emerges as a critique of the linguistic assumptions that inform structuralist analysis, deconstruction's critique of structuralism can be extended to painting and architecture. But, as we have discovered, deconstruction is not merely a strategy of criticism, for it is obsessed

with an altarity that can never be represented. Indeed, it is precisely the inevitable imbrication of altarity and structure that undoes every structure as if from within. Painters and architects who acknowledge the force of post-structuralism face a twofold task: first, they must develop an *artistic* critique of previous artistic practices; and, second, they must use figure and form to suggest that which can be neither figured nor formed.

While it is possible to identify a broad range of artists who directly and indirectly probe issues raised by post-structuralism, no one has addressed these questions in a more sustained way than Mark Tansey. Tansey's work-is especially interesting because it both continues the classic genre of easel painting and remains highly figurative, indeed, even representational. During Tansey's formative years, the ruling orthodoxies in the art world were Minimalism and Conceptualism. Painting was regarded by many artists and critics as retrograde, if not reactionary. Convinced that questions of representation are considerably more complex than they appear to be in modernism, Tansey began probing figuration in a way that has gradually displayed its richness and complexity. Relentlessly critical of the myth of the avant-garde, he ridicules many of the most cherished convictions of this century's leading artists ("Myth of Depth"). His more effective paintings, however, are less didactic and more subtle. Through a variety of strategies ranging from traditional *trompe l'oeil* to innovative compositional methods that combine found images, xerography, and the handwork of painting, Tansey investigates the aporias of representation.

Around the mid-1980s, Tansey began to address directly the debate between structuralists and post-structuralists. ("Iconograph", "The Bricoleur's Daughter", "Bridge Over the Cartesian Gap", "Doubting Thomas"). In many of his most interesting works from this period, he actually incorporates selections from the texts of Derrida and de Man in paintings that obscure the line between word and image to create a graphic practice of uncommon power. ("Under Erasure", a "Reader") As Tansey's exploration of deconstruction deepens, leading post-structuralist figures actually begin to appear in his paintings. ("Constructing the Grand Canyon", "Bridging the Cartesian Gap", "Derrida Queries de Man")

However, as long as the painted word is visible, the process of erasure is incomplete. The disappearance of the word is not a

simple absence but leaves a play of traces flickering in non-representative representations. "Mont Sainte-Victoire" is one of Tansey's most intriguing paintings. Combining elements of Cezanne's famous paintings "Mont Sainte-Victoire" and "The Bathers", Tansey's work depicts a group of men along the border of a lake. Among the bathers are Derrida, Barthes, and Baudrillard. The more one gazes at this painting, the more puzzling it becomes. Though everything seems perfectly precise, nothing actually fits. Most important, reflections do not reflect but form polar opposites in which opposites are reversed. For example, men become women and women become men. Furthermore, the painting as a whole appears to be reversible. If one inverts the painting, Cezanne's mountain becomes something resembling Plato's cave. It is, however, two details framing the picture that are particularly arresting. On the left border of the painting at the edge of the lake, there is an umbrella and on the right border, there is a bridge with multiple arches. These details echo other paintings. As his preparatory studies indicate, "The Bricoleur's Daughter" emerges from Tansey's investigation of Derrida's *Spurs*, which you will recall, is, among other things, a prolonged meditation on a fragment in which Nietzsche writes: "I think I forgot my umbrella". Moving from the left to the right edge of the work, we discover a bridge that anticipates two later works: "Bridge over the Cartesian Gap" and "Leonardo's Wheel". The only element in "Mont Sainte-Victoire" that is not doubled is the umbrella. It is as though the umbrella marks the margin or border in and through which all differences and oppositions emerge.

This border preoccupies Tansey in "Leonardo's Wheel". For more than a decade, Tansey has been fascinated by the possibilities created by fractal geometry and chaos theory for the reconfiguration of classical oppositions like order/disorder and singularity/totality. Leonardo, of course, was intrigued by the problem of turbulence and subjected it to careful scientific and artistic study. In "Leonardo's Wheel," the boundary simultaneously joining and separating opposites, which is marked by Nietzsche's umbrella, returns as margins within margins and frames within frames. The bridge does not so much span gaps and join opposites as mark the site of transition in through which opposites emerge and pass away. Though figured in a certain way, this site is nonetheless invisible. Like the Heideggerian cleaving and clearing that creates the space for appearance to appear, the

edges and wakes *within* Tansey's painting appear by withdrawing and withdraw by appearing.

The task of figuring the unfigurable is even more challenging for the architect than the painter. To develop a post-structural or deconstructive architecture might seem to be a self-defeating undertaking. Nonetheless, one of the most interesting developments in recent architecture is what has been labelled "Deconstuctive Architecture". In June 1988, Philip Johnson attempted to bring a semblance of order to the disorder of contemporary architecture by mounting an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art entitled "Deconstructivist Architecture". While all of these architects share misgivings about modern and traditional postmodern architecture, only the work of Tschumi, Eisenman, and Libeskind seriously engages the critical issues raised by Derrida and other post-structuralists. But even here, differences are as important as similarities. Each of the architects focuses on a different aspect of the post-structuralist debate.

Tschumi's most important work to date is La Vilette, which is a park located on the border of Paris. This project brings to fruition theoretical reflections that Tschumi had been developing for many years. Having been deeply influenced by the events of May 1968, Tschumi draws much of his theoretical inspiration from the writings of Georges Bataille. While Bataille's work was known and admired by many Left-Bank artists and intellectuals, it did not gain a wide audience until Derrida published his reading of Bataille, "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve", in *Writing and Difference* in 1967. This essay has created many confusions for readers who only know Bataille through Derrida's work. Even though there are important points of intersection between Derridean deconstruction and Bataille's transgressive writings, there are also significant differences. Whereas Derridean *différance* eludes the binary of presence and absence in such a way that something is always missing or lacking, Bataillean heterogeneity entails an excess that ruptures structures constructed to contain it. In La Vilette, Tschumi stages a non-dialectical play of opposites that more closely approximates Bataille's excess than Derrida's trace. By combining the point grid with an assemblage of diverse "follies", Tschumi remarks nonrepresentable points of interruption that reason both needs and yet cannot comprehend. Folly is the madness that reason must

exclude in order to be itself. As such, folly is reason's double, which repeatedly returns as an embarrassment that turns white faces red.

In its original design, La Vilette was to include smaller works by other architectures. One of these projects within the project brought together Eisenman and Derrida. Though this collaboration has not resulted in an actual construction, it has generated a record of the exchange between Eisenman and Derrida that is extremely informative and suggestive. The difference between Tschumi and Eisenman repeats the difference between Bataille and Derrida.

Eisenman's career might be understood as an architectural enactment of the debate between structuralism and post-structuralism. In his early work, he appropriated Chomsky's notion of generative grammar to produce a series of highly influential houses. Though Eisenman never associated Chomsky's grammar with Saussure's account of language, which forms the basis of structural analysis, the similarities between the two positions are sufficient to make the critique of the latter relevant for a rethinking of the former. In the writings of Derrida, Eisenman discovered a new opening for architectural theory and practice. The results of this discovery appear for the first time in the Wexner Center.

The Wexner Center is a complex building that weaves together several conflicting strands. Instead of simply rejecting his earlier style or styles, Eisenman reexamines his previous works in an effort to disrupt and dislocate assumptions that once seemed secure. Straight lines, geometric forms, and grids do not simply disappear but proliferate to the point of excess. At some points, Eisenman becomes overly didactic. For example, the museum is wedged in a crevasse created by cutting the existing structure in half. It is as if Eisenman were attempting to literalize the deconstructive notion of the fault in a way not unlike Tansey's depiction of "Doubting Thomas". On the level of detail, Eisenman breaks columns. interrupts staircases, and creates irregularly shaped galleries that frustrate viewers' expectations. But it is again a detail, which is more supplemental than integral, that most effectively captures the architectural drift of deconstruction. Wexner Center is built on a site that was once occupied by an armory. In a gesture that seems quintessentially postmodern, Eisenman appends a reconstruction of the armory's tower as a decorative detail. Again giving in to didacticism, he does not merely repeat the tower but splits it in such a way that it is

unclear whether it can be reassembled. In addition to this "artificial" tower, Eisenman had intended to preserve the "real" foundation of the "original" armory but during construction, workers accidentally destroyed this foundation. Undaunted, Eisenman constructed a simulacrum of the absent foundation on its original site. It is possible to read Eisenman's entire project through the erasure and reinscription of this foundation. Like *différance* itself, this trace, which is a foundation that is not a foundation, simultaneously grounds and ungrounds the structure surrounding it.

Though their media are vastly different, the work of Tansey and Eisenman often seems to be haunted by the ghost of illustration. In those cases where an illustrative element is undeniable, the very notion of representation that deconstruction renders problematic is reinvoked. Daniel Libeskind's relation to deconstruction is considerably deeper and more subtle. Few architects have exercised more influence without actually building than Libeskind. With the construction of the addition to the Berlin Museum, which will house the collection devoted to the history of Jewish life in Berlin, he is finally translating his ideas from page and model to building.

Libeskind's addition to the Berlin Museum is a supplement to a building that stands on Lindenstrasse near the centre of the old city of Berlin. This building is not original but is a substitute for an 18th century baroque edifice that once was the seat of the Prussian supreme court and housed the offices of the German author, composer and critic E.T.A. Hoffman, who was immortalized in Freud's famous essay on the uncanny. As if to underscore the marginality of his work, Libeskind names his project "Between the Lines." Though endlessly complex, limitations of time allow us to consider only three interrelated aspects of this project: the interior of the so-called original museum, the tower outside the main structure of the addition, and the structure of the addition. The Berlin Museum does not remain unscathed by the extension constructed to house the Jewish Museum. In the midst of the old building, Libeskind inserts an empty volume that inversely mirrors one of the negative spaces in the addition. This void cuts through every floor of the baroque building in a way that disrupts the stability of the existing structure. At the base of the empty space, he locates a stairway leading to an underground tunnel that connects the museum to its supplement by inserting the supplement into the middle of the museum. The floor of the corridor is slanted

to create the sensation of an unstable ground. There are no right angles in this strange space. The main axis of the building is intersected by two additional axes that form an elongated X, which represents the two poles of Jewish history. Surreptitiously establishing a link between inside and outside, this disruptive X charts the course to both the Holocaust and the Promised Land. Beyond the "outer" wall of the museum stands a twenty-two meter tower whose irregular shape is the reverse image of the negative space that forms the empty volume inside the old museum. This is the Holocaust Tower. Doublings that are redoubled, negations that are negated, reversals that are reversed create a vertigo that removes the ground from beneath one's feet. At the end of one of the long, buried passages, a vast empty space opens that extends upward for more than five stories. There is nothing in this space except five enormous "veils" stretching from the top of the structure to several meters above the floor. Veils upon veils reveal by reveiling in a play that is endless.

The space of the Holocaust Tower creates time for a twofold remembering of forgetting. In the darkness of the first night, the forgotten are remembered. Victims whose names have long since faded from memory are recalled as forgotten. The memory of forgetting does not erase the tragedy but deepens a wound that never heals. Far from a therapy that cures, memory revives the pain of forgetting. In the midst of this wound, another night approaches by withdrawing to clear the way for a second remembering of forgetting. The Holocaust Tower not only remembers the forgotten but is also a memorial to the Im-memorial. As the unrepresentable before that we remember by forgetting, the Immemorial is the ever-outstanding future that approaches as the past we have always left behind.

Libeskind's museum is haunted by another void or by a different inscription of the same void. The zigs and zags of the building are cut by the straight lines of a void that comprises one-third of the total volume of the structure. The aberrant line of the z's plot the course of Berlin's deviant history. This story line is faulted, fissured, and fragmented by a void opening in its midst. On the walls of this void in the middle of the structure, the history of the Jews of Berlin hangs. From the outside, the addition to the Berlin Museum appears to be a continuous building. But appearances are deceptive, for the structure is inwardly divided. The broken line of the void cuts the convoluted line of the museum

to form what are, in effect, seven separate structures. While intricately related, these parts never have formed and never will form a totality. "The new extension", Libeskind explains, "is conceived as an emblem. The invisible has made itself apparent as the Void, and not the invisible. Void/invisible: these structural features have been gathered in this space of the City and laid bare. An Architecture where the unnamed remains: the names keep still."

In this void ... along this void ... at the edge of this void, the unnamed remains and names keep still. Whose name is inscribed in this emptiness? What is the name of the unnameable? Though Libeskind offers no direct answer to these questions, Blanchot points in the direction of a response when he suggests that one of the names of the unnameable is *God*.

> The name of God, he writes, signifies not only that what is named by this word would not belong to the language in which this name occurs, but that this name, in a way that is difficult to determine, would no longer be a part of this language, even apart from it. The idolatry of the name or only the reverence that makes it unpronounceable (sacred) is related to this disappearance of the *name* that the name itself makes appear... Pure name that does not name, but is rather always to be named, the name as name, but, in that, hardly a name, without nominative power, attached as if by chance to language and, thus, transmitting to it the devastating power of non-designation ...

This is the power — the devastating power — the power that is always the force of the disaster that haunts the void inside the supplement to the Berlin Museum as an outside that can never be incorporated. The religious motifs informing Liebeskind's work bring us back to the theological issues framing our analysis. By way of conclusion, I would like to return to Kierkegaard. The question of God, as Kierkegaard teaches us, is the question of otherness. The question of otherness, as Derrida teaches us, involves neither fundamental difference nor simple opposition. The challenge of postmodern theological reflection — and no theology that is not postmodern is adequate for our times — is to refigure the otherness of God as non-dialectical, non-oppositional difference. Every difference that defines itself in dialectical or oppositional terms is

inevitably the other *of* same and, therefore, is reducible to the very identity from which it struggles to distinguish itself. To think unthought difference is to think theology otherwise by reading contemporary culture differently.

Throughout the theological tradition, the otherness of God has been conceived either oppositionally or dialectically. In contrasting ways, these construals of altarity entail a difference that makes no difference. Since difference identifies itself as an oppositional identity, its ostensible otherness is really a covert sameness. What oppositional and dialectical thinking cannot conceive is an altarity that is *neither* identical *nor* different. To insist that this strange altarity is not present in the western ontotheological tradition is not, however, to claim that it is merely absent. From the beginning, perhaps even before the beginning, altarity has always already been thought *as unthought*. To think this unthought otherness is to unthink traditional theological thinking. Consistently non-dialectical and non-oppositional, this unthinking is not anti-theological or atheistic but is a/theological. A/theology *is not* a latter-day version of negative theology. As the inverse of the *via positiva*, the *via negativa* creates a mirror image that changes nothing. Negation is covert affirmation, emptiness implicit fullness, and absence covert presence. A/theology, by contrast, seeks to think the unthinkable margin of difference that is the condition of the possibility and impossibility of all affirmation and negation, emptiness and fullness, presence and absence.

When so understood, a/theological reflection consists of two interrelated gestures, which roughly correspond to historic and constructive theology. First, it is necessary to reread the theological tradition against the grain to discern the points at which thought is constructed by excluding or repressing altarity. As I have indicated, to think this unthought is to unthink classical theology. Second, having begun to think the unthinkable, it is necessary to inscribe altarity in texts that are unavoidably *performative*. When altarity is in question, language can be neither representational nor referential but must be improper and indirect. The twists and turns of tropological discourse stage the incessant withdrawal in and through which altarity approaches without ever arriving. The perpetual deferral of the end reflects the infinite retreat of the origin, thereby leaving nothing but an endless middle where aimless erring becomes unavoidable.

The space of this erring is simcult; its times postmodern.
When not interpreted in terms of the metaphysics of presence, the
culture of simulacra does not appear to be the scene of realized
presence but as the stage of a relentless disappearance, which
allows nothing to appear. In the midst of the nonabsent absence of
nothing, presence is never present. Forever calling from a beyond
that is (impossibly) "within", altarity challenges us to keep
searching for an elsewhere we can never know. To heed this call is
to confess that ending never ends.

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