

NEIL LEACH – ANAESTHETICS (architecture as an anaesthetic)

Lecturer PhD. Arch. Andreea MATACHE*

This paper was firstly edited in 1999 in England (Cambridge) and reedited and translated shortly, being issued by Paideia Publishing House. As a compendium of architecture essays, the book is structured on five chapters addressing various philosophical topics of the time the paper was being elaborated. The book is currently of interest due to the topicality of its content, which still has a scientific impact, being problematised in the interdisciplinary bodies where architecture too finds its theoretical basis. Greatly influenced by the early 21st century authors and philosophical movements, as Jean Baudrillard's work, Neal Leach brings up and tries to transpose in architecture a series of philosophical topics. Parallel to addressing the current urban issues based on the ***image*** and ***aestheticization process*** concepts, the author tries to turn to some philosophical concepts and to the theorists elaborating them. All over the book, Neal Leach refers to the works of prominent figures as "*Simulacra and simulation*" (2008), of Jean Baudrillard, Walter Benjamin's "*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (or Reproducibility)*" (1936) and "*The society of the spectacle*" (1970), by Guy Debord.

Another group of theorists mentioned by Leach primarily come from post-modern culture with applications in architecture. "*Learning from Las Vegas*" written by Richard Venturi, Scott Brown and Steven Izenour was a success of the time, yet it raised controversy for relating to the architect profession as a mercantile approach in which art becomes a mass product in a consumer society. This is pretty much the general theoretical basis for Neal Leach's book, largely focused on elaborating ideas, calling instead for reflection on topics of still current interest, as afore-mentioned. Here is an overview of the book's chapters with the mention that the titles were chosen such as to impact on the reader, the symbolically restrained message being a minus in the contemporary communication the author is trying to explain to us.

Chapter 1 called "*Image proliferation*" addresses broadly the lack of visual communication-based message in which the image becomes hyper-reality, disseminating it makes it "meaningful" while the information "generates meaning". The reality – imaginary – pseudo-reality trinomial is a consequence of distorting the symbols of communication messages, overwhelming in case of Disneylands, as a prototype of consumer culture, "the new 20th century religion". In this chapter, the author dwells on the ***aestheticization*** concept (Aestheticization of the world) explaining, through the phenomenon of replacing the specific local cultures by a global culture, the "simulation" of the new mixed culture in which the image becomes an object of adoration while the way we perceive it results in a frugal process of understanding which doesn't allow perception to go beyond the image. Art loses its metaphysical message and reduces itself to the aestheticized picture; in this point, the author mentions that "in lieu of the aesthetic judgment we find the obscene fascination of the excess". Being oversized, the art market becomes oversaturated and the artistic message is replaced by the mercantile logic of the market on the background of

* Lecturer PhD. Arch. Andreea MATACHE, Spiru Haret University, Faculty of Architecture, Bucharest, Romania.

"aestheticizing the world's entire industrial mechanism", which leads to meaninglessness and increased aestheticization. When speaking about the *Aestheticization politics*, the author refers to the mechanisms and strategies of promoting public art in reference to the art of propaganda that intentionally conveys a message, as the Marxist art. The question is whether the political artistic message may be an artistic message. The art – politics allegory involves the following factors: if the political message in art is an artistic message; the social environment's influence in elaborating the work of art; to what extent art is influential in politics; drawing the political message out of the context and going back to art; the context, as a determinant in understanding the work of art.

The second chapter, "The *aestheticization policies*," raises the issue of the authenticity of the artistic act, using the "truth" (Kant) and "reality" (Nietzsche) philosophical concepts, which paradoxically draw attention on the context of "reading" the message: what is art if drawn out of its social and political context? Turning to philosophy to explain the aesthetic act comes to help the author. To this end, referring to Walter Benjamin's philosophical work consolidates the author's theory that the aestheticization of art through the political message solely turns it into an act of propaganda. This is about power architecture promoted by Albert Speer during Nazism and about propaganda by means of aestheticized forms and messages. It is also about the Italian utopists and about promoting the fascist policy up to annoying affirmations as "the war brings the artistic pleasure of the technologically altered sensory perception" (see Marinetti). Turning again to architecture, the author states that its aestheticisation is one of mass media components that can promote the political ideas of the age, making a comparison between the consequences of World War II and the Gulf War; war architecture, so called by the author, alters or remodels the structure of a town to the same extent as war can destroy the built areas. Along the same lines, the author addresses the Sarajevo case, described in Lebbens Woods' book.

Consequently, architecture may become a means for the subliminal conditioning of the asserted messages, as it may determine political and social changes with its functionality. From the space control promoted by architecture (see Bentham's Panopticon) to the induction of a certain human behaviour in a space, architecture may generate diverse messages, which would deserve more attention in this chapter of the book.

In the third chapter, entitled also "*The Drug of the Image*", the hypotheses launched by Simmel, which have been discussed at the beginning of the presentation, are debated. The "narcotic effect of the city" (W. Benjamin) is brought into question again, developed by the lack of the myth in the urban culture. Leach also makes a comparison between Simmel's and Benjamin's theories; between a neurotic world, psychically blazed and a world anaesthetised by the continuous shocks of the daily life. Therefore, by the voices of the two authors, Leach concludes that the contemporary world is characterised by two attributes: the indifference and the intoxication; a society's psychoanalysis would prove the individual shock resistance capacity and the feedback's resonance. In both cases, aesthetics may have ambivalent effect, of a panacea or a disturbing factor. The author, wishing to clear the concepts used (clearing made incompletely, though), explains the Greek etymology of the "aesthetic" term. Aesthesia refers though to the sensorial perception as to a "state of senses and emotions rising and their awakening", definition which can be separated from the abstract theory of the beauty, as to a native perception and non-acculturated state. In the following quote, the author states that: "*the image's seduction acts against any social awareness fundamental sense*," where a part of the "aesthetic" term interpretation is found- but in

this case, we have arguments to oppose the author's opinion. The aesthetization is a process resulted from a cultural act.

The penultimate chapter refers to the "*Image as a consumer good*," Leach talks about the consumption ritual related to a certain situation, as space and time event of the direct experience, free of any constraint. Another author is referred to, Sadie Plant, who speaks about "situationists", as people involved in the elaborated mechanism of the consumerism, removed from the goods they have created and from the social practices which have led to their elaboration. The author pleads for creating forms expressing actual, deliberate life moments. A new reference to architecture emerges here, the spectacle architecture as post-modernist reflection theme, with the expansion of the commercial and leisure areas. From the image's superficiality mentioned by Guy Debord, the author states Venturi's idea about the image transformed in merchandise. A whole debate space may emerge by bringing into focus the subject related to the Las Vegas phenomenon, inexhaustible subject about the commercial ad's effect as immoral gesture of making the image into a fetish. Therefore, the advertising abounds in motives of the contemporaneous life, reaching abusive forms: the exploration of the woman's image, the exacerbated sexuality, a patriarchal trend in approaching the advertising themes, going towards an absolute decorativism, found especially in the postmodernist architecture and having Venturi as disciple. Leaving the sultry territory of the cardboard construction, the author goes toward the ***revolution's aesthetics***, where the mistakes from the past must have a didactic role and must not be repeated. The promotion of a radical aesthetics is required, without interpretations or suspicions.

The last chapter, being a conclusion to the others, speaks about the "*Image's seduction*," referring again to Las Vegas, as the city of seduction, the social capital of the show and the climax of a superficial world lacking content. The seduction replaces therefore the significance, by exercising all the necessary instruments, as a strategy of the consumption society. Las Vegas's seduction, as the author states towards the end of the book, is centred on an image ethics as a "simple encounter between the form and the form" and on the principle "form creates function". In a prophetic sense, we must learn from the fiascos in the existence of this city, the immediate reality confirms it. The architects have the mission to create tastes and initiate an art form in the public space. Experience and experiment, especially in the case of the North-American towns, a few of the Eastern-European cities and a few years in the case of the Middle East rich areas, in the case of architectural programmes atypical for the cultural context in which they are inserted, demonstrated and still demonstrate enough contradictory results. Image sequences in high numbers still decorate the cities' walls. Since the writing of the book until present, the contemporary civilisation did not change a lot in terms of development of the urban life communication. New means of communication comprising time and suppressing space were invented.

In the end of our presentation, we support the modernity of the themes presented in the book and the inter- and trans-disciplinary approach of the presented subjects. The book comes with a few illustrations supporting the text by their visual impact. Neal Leach suggests an interactive reading on contemporary subjects of the urban life, extended to a metropolis, where the image is a communication vector between the individuals, doubled by the virtual techniques of the Internet, by new immaterial spaces. The architecture can be a rebound space in a world devoid of meanings, an "anaesthetic" in a

neurotic society, who has forgotten the sense of time and the aim of space. Nonetheless, at times we remember that time is moral and space is emotional!

References

1. Leach, Neil. *Anestetica. Arhitectura ca anestezic*. Colecția Spații imaginate. București: Paideia. 1999.