The Primacy of Perplexion

Working Architecture through a Distracted Order of Experience

PART I – FICTIONAL REALITY IN SEARCH OF A SELF

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The issues addressed in this article moves around a central concern of mine, which is, in its essence, ambiguous. It is idealistic in the sense that it does not give up the belief in the possibility of living a responsible life, within a world of individuals and materiality. It is nihilistic in the sense that it avoids accepting any structures that are higher than the individual, that claim the right to, on an extra-human ground, conduct our decisions. The ambiguity is inherent but, I would argue, necessary. The article has been divided into two parts. Part I puts forward the theoretical position on which the further analysis is grounded and discusses the literary space of Virginia Woolf's novel *Jacob's Room* as a model for a 'distracted order' of reality. Part II discusses Steven Holl and Lebbeus Woods' respective works (texts and projects), focusing on the possibility of making an architecture that communicates through a 'distracted reality' and the two architects' very different approaches to responsible 'professional' action in today's society.

MAYBE CONFUSION would have been a better world. But could one really suggest a primacy of confusion? I would not like to think so, even though the two terms are closely connected. Confusion is probably the most widespread way of perceiving our personal situations and more general surroundings of today. The contradictions of life are apparent on the surface of our everyday experience – we take part in and receive information about all sorts of discourses, not *intended* to be mixed, not *made* to fit each other but nevertheless more than present in one and the same person. This is a description of a society in change. Even the most well-polished politician makes statements under the mask of sound rationalism that seem, even if just minimum attention is payed to the contents, to attempt the creation of multi-parallel worlds, on one earth. Why is this a problematic situation? Or rather, where lies the danger?

Knowledge as Fragment

Democracy[1] today, is based on the actions of politicians, elected to work for the future of a society. But the politician described, any of those we are asked to elect, does not in this context give any confidence and there will be nobody around to replace him. 'Nobody', not because man has lost his logical mind, not because he has lost his sight, but probably because our inherited concept of ultimate 'truth' and 'reason' are no longer applicable to the world of our experience. To make the world make sense for us, we have to understand it

through different layers of meaning, pieces of sense bound to situations, rather than trying to make it all fit into a system. We have to accept that these different layers might not tie together in an enormous rational network that, in wild dreams, through computer technology, would help us to live meaningfully on this earth, ultimately logical and truly universal. To create that network would be to simply mimic the universe, to assume to present it *as it is*, as opposed to humbly presenting helpful models, put forward to our human understanding as *translations* of what we perceive – *pieces* of knowledge. Knowledge as the way of understanding our situation within the world of our life and our time. Knowledge as what we need in order to communicate, a ground, however shifting it is, that needs to be there.

Democracy and 'Reason'

To continue the task of 'democracy' – the individual's right to be responsible for his own life while living together with other individuals – the 'knowledge of the fragment' has to be defended from the seductive challenge to move the universe into the human mind, kept safely there under full control, distanciated from experience and life. The paradox of not allowing 'reason'[2] to coexist with all other contradictions of life, (adding just another), is justified by the masking nature that it undoubtedly has. Since in 'reason' paradoxes and contradictions are not allowed it automatically hides the nature of the world as experienced and thus creates a dangerous condition of repression. There is no alternative of returning to a unified world, attempts in that direction would lead to suppression and totalitarianism, because it is based on a belief in something that is higher than the individual, something that can claim the right to conduct, and that belief is no longer present – nobody has the right to claim it. Instead a possibility is offered if we have the courage to accept knowledge as being not a unified body but constituted of pieces offering us layers of meanings of the world, and to live that reality through.

This does not, in any sense, mean that reason has ceased to operate, that desire for knowledge per se has turned into a threat; it is not an attack on the phenomena of rational science – what has to be cleared is only the mist of ultimate truth and reason. This is not a simple task, because a weak belief has to replace a strong, more easily justified belief. It cannot promise a utopia in sight, prediction is neither possible nor desirable. It has to live on hope and courage, on each individual's capacity to project himself into an uncertain but yet possible future. Through a working with the resistance that is given in our world we might learn to understand ourselves and others as individuals of integrity and cooperation. In this paper I hope to present possible ways of acting in this reality through architecture. There are no rules to be derived from this, no recipies implied, but rather just a pointing out of what shows itself today.

> At the one and the same time, therefore, society is everything and society is nothing. Society is the most powerful concoction in the world and society has no existence whatsoever. Such monsters the poets and novelists alone can deal with; with such somethings-nothings their works are stuffed out to prodiguous size; and to them with the best will in the world we are content to leave it. (...) this is one of the cases where the truth does not exist. Nothing exists. The whole thing is a miasma – a mirage.[3]

Architecture and Interaction

The aim of this paper is to explore how this question is reflected in the practice of two contemporary architects; Steven Holl and Lebbeus Woods. In their work I will argue that 'perplexion' is consciously addressed in order to create through built constructions a space of interaction and that the specifics of the world are made to speak of a possible poetic

'whole'. Steven Holl and Lebbeus Woods are both based in New York; a city which might make most obvious the above described conditions. I have chosen to put them besides each other since their intentions, as expressed in published writings, in some ways are very similar and yet their formal responses to the identified problems are very different. It will not be a strict comparison where differences and similarities are put forward and analysed but rather a presentation of their ideas and work put together and organised around themes of importance for this issue.

Before entering the world of making the philosophical notion of 'distracted perception' will be discussed to provide a base for further analysis. With the help of fictional space, provided here by Virginia Woolf in her novel *Jacob's Room*[4], I wish to make such a perception more clear and further discuss how fiction in this way can be a vehicle to understand and clarify architectural space as a non-objective, -physical or -'true' reality.

The Primacy of Perplexion

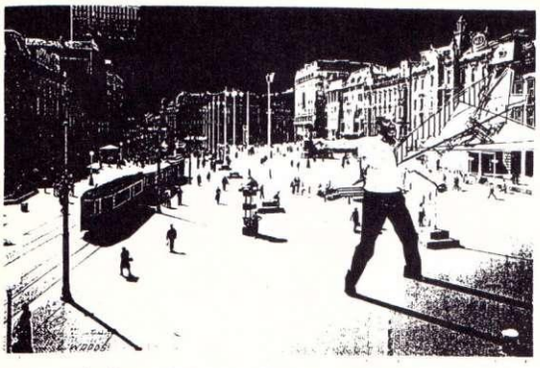
Why would 'perplexion' as a state of being deserve the rank of primacy? And for what reason should it be useful? The idea, as I have come across it, is developed by philosophers such as Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger, and is interpreted in a post-modern context by Gianni Vattimo, most clearly in his essay "Art and Oscillation"[5]. I would like to define 'perplexion' as being in this context, the state in which the individual finds herself hit by essential meaning. Moving through space today, our conscious body gathers an immense amount of information and triggers all sorts of images, associations, memories and anticipations to be 'united' in experience. The essential feature of this experience is 'distraction', a thick veil that is difficult but necessary to pierce through. The piercing through lets the individual reach out from her invaded inner space, and forces the outer, the materiality of physical presence, to become a ground to rest on for a short moment. To come out in the world as a *Dasein*, an existence beyond subject and object, is the only possibility I can see of a critical interaction between individuals, providing a field for a short-lived democratic discourse.

"Dasein means: being held out into the nothing"[6]

Heidegger's early essay, "What is Metaphysics?" contains a very clear analysis of the nature of Dasein, as reached through the experience of 'nothingness'. Here anxiety is what helps us out into the 'nothing' so as to bring *Dasein* "before beings as such". Later, in "The Origin of the Work of Art"[7], the work of art is assigned the role of unfounding and bringing existence towards an experience of its own mortality and thus being within the world. It is in this later context that I would like to propose that architecture could play a role as deliberately seeking to pierce through distraction to carry the *Dasein* into the nothing, thus preparing her for encountering the world and others.

> Holding itself out into the nothing, Dasein is in each case already beyond beings as a whole. This being beyond beings we call "transcendence". If in the ground of its essence Dasein were not transcending, (...), then it could never be related to beings nor even to itself.[8]

Nothing[9] is the precondition of all beings, it is before the negation of logical operation, it is not the mere opposite of Being, it cannot be regarded as an object or a something that is. Nothing is primarily an 'experience', an experience of suspension allowing for reconsideration of accepted values, an uprooting from previous foundations. It is what cracks open the absolute and allows for change and fluctuation, removes us from the stasis of metaphysics but yet, in our being among and working upon beings, make possible for temporary foundations. The experience of mortal-



Lebbeus Woods: 'Monument' 1991.[10]

ity gives the key to life itself, in that it is what gives resistance and thus demands reaction from ourselves. It is the force of time that make our surroundings change and decay and in realising our constant movement towards death, we can turn around and see our being within the world.

> Only because the nothing is manifest in the ground of Dasein can the total strangeness of beings overwhelm us. Only when the strangeness of beings oppresses us does it arouse and evoke wonder – the revelation of the nothing – does the "why ?" loom before us. Only because the "why" is possible as such can we in a definite way inquire into grounds, and ground them.[11]

Media and 'Reality'

This question of the 'nothing', as an 'opener' of both subject and object, is of decisive importance for the Postmodern condition, being the age of mass communication, as Gianni Vattimo describes it. The role of mass media in transforming society lies mainly in its introducing a multiplicity of perspectives and thus taking away the firm ground that the one reality we formerly knew provided us. The realities offered by different media cannot be pieced together into one coherent picture, referring back to the 'real' world. Our common reality has become in a sense 'fictionalized'.[12] This change has a clear double edge. On one hand it makes possible a democratisation and pluralisation in that now there are channels available for 'anyone' to express their opinion, but on the other hand there is also an inherent risk of the power of media to homogenize culture; if the mixing is done thoroughly enough, no traces will be left of the ingredients formerly put in. Once our sense of reality has become fictionalized there is a danger of confusion: What is the nature of the reality on which my acts are a response?, How can I draw the line between dream, fiction and reality that were once so unquestionable? and ultimately How do I recognise myself as something other than the world and other than the 'other'? It is here that I would believe that the blow of 'nothingness' or the 'shock' of art sets in and give us a faint direction to our actions.

Penetrating into the Web of Reality

The role of art and architecture today is distinctly different from what it once was. Before the transformation that was set off by the increasing possibility of mechanical reproduction[13] and the loss of faith in both God and Nature, art was judged by its correspondence to a higher idea and assumed to contain eternal values.[14] Beginning in the 19th century and becoming more obvious in our century, art has instead proceeded by a constant questioning of itself and its higher values, while architecture has been caught in the last higher value, its most technical use-value, degraded to a mathematical equation where other values if recognised have only been attached to the surface. In this context architecture has become, due to its abdication to pure technical requirements, a sum of objects, inhabited by far removed subjects. The division between objectified reality and subjectified perception is inscribed in the process of production.

But, as earlier pointed out, this unfortunate division between object and subject has been radically altered today through the effect of mass communication that 'fictionalises' reality. As the subject fuse with the object, what we have left are only 'fables'[15]. Here architecture might disappear completely if architec-

tural space becomes internalised and dependent on images from TV and experiences from Virtual Reality rather than on the perception of the material world. But is there any pure perception left to propose in order to save us and our built reality from the threat of becoming self-sufficient and in a sense self-contained? This could be regarded as a very far-fetched question since most of us still firmly believe that we sense the world as we experience it. But it is essential to question it, because the base of our actions, the positions we take and the filter through which we perceive our environment is largely made up from the invasive body of information that surrounds us since childhood. And the fact that this information is not possible to piece together to one comprehensible reality makes our positions truly unstable, and ethically questionable. A strategy is demanded to navigate between the quest for reinstitution of absolute values for the sake of stability and the power of media to merge 'information' into our beings until no recognition of the self or the other is possible. In tune with our time, as a time of paradox and contradiction, both of these threats seem often to come from the same source.

> Deep beneath the sea they embrace, these enemies of us, these conditions of our life, holding us up on the surface, pulling us down from below (...) Scylla, Carybdis, you are the circle, you are the cross (...) Oh! When can we ever step out?[16]

Perplexion, the blow of art, is what I would suggest might bring us into the thickness of the boundary, made impenetrable by the absolutists and completely erased by media-domination. An architecture which makes its own materiality present, which turns preconceived notions around and hits the user at the core of his security; might give us a possibility of a constant reanchoring in what has to be in between to provide a medium for interaction, the matter that let the waves of communication transmit. This is the interpretation Gianni Vattimo makes in his essay "Art and Oscillation"[17] of Walter Benjamin's notion of 'shock' and Heidegger's notion of 'stoss': It is only through a constant unfounding that a new world, system of significations, can be founded. The aim is never to complete the founding but to keep the 'disorientation' alive. It is by a reversed focusing on the apparent multiplicity of our complex web of realities and a simultaneous penetration of this web into something that is other, something that we cannot name, but know is there, that architecture could address the problems of today.

Jacob's Room – Fictional Space of Reality

Reading *Jacob's Room* by Virginia Woolf is a remarkable experience. In the novel she tries a completely new approach to the narrative, where 'reality' is built up through a narrator entering different points of perspective, letting different voices speak about the world as experienced through their bodies, minds and desires. There is a sense of a simultaneous overlapping of a hovering world's spirit, viewing reality from a bird's eye perspective, and the specificity of the character's thoughts and perceptions. The two levels of perspective (the 'universal' and the 'situational') are differentiated with a change between present and past tense, allowing the text to flow between these positions, avoiding dominance from the narrating voice *(see 2nd quotation below)*. She describes this step as starting to draw from life instead of line drawing from sculptures (as her sister, Vanessa Bell, had had to do in painting), getting away from the stereotype character and moving towards the complex and specific personality.[18] Thus the characters are mysterious and not coherent, as fluctuating as time that flows and perceptions that changes.

> It seems then that men and women are equally at fault. It seems that a profound,

impartial, and absolutely just opinion of our fellow-creatures are utterly unknown. (...) In any case life is but a procession of shadows, and God knows why it is that we embrace them so eagerly, and see them depart with such anguish, being shadows. And why, if this and much more than this is true, why are we yet surprised in the window corner by a sudden vision that the young man in the chair is of all things in the world the most real, the most solid, the best known to us – why indeed? For the moment after we know nothing about him.

Such is the manner of our seeing. Such is the conditions of our love.[19]

Borrowing an eye lending the wings ...

What is relevant to the scope of this paper is the effect this has on the space of the fictive reality. It is clear that, even with the help of a 'hovering world's spirit', there is no question of any outer, cartesian objective reality, but the tints that each character gives to it depending on the relations to the persons that inhabit it and the associations and memories that it might evoke, all build upp a very different reality and give you a sensation of the multiplicity of the world rather than of a false unity. The way the narrator enters the characters is through their full perception. We are confronted with all sorts of impressions that effects the senses and are carried away from these with the associations that they evoke.

Slowly welling from the point of her gold-nib, pale blue ink dissolved the full stop; for there her pen stuck; her eyes fixed, and tears slowly filled them. The entire bay quivered; the lighthouse wobbled; and she had the illusion that the mast of Mr. Connor's yacht was bending like a wax candle in the sun. She winked quickly. Accidents were awful things. She winked again. The mast was straight, the waves regular; the lighthouse was upright; but the blot had spread. (...)

Such were Betty Flander's letters to Captain Barfoot – many paged, tear-stained. Scarborough is seven hundred miles from Cornwall: Captain Barfoot is in Scarborough: Seabrook is dead. Tears made all the dahlias in her garden undulate in red waves and flashed the glass house in her eyes, and spangled the kitchen with bright knives, and made Mrs Jarvis, the rector's wife, think at church, while the hymn-tune played and Mrs. Flanders bent low over her little boys' heads, that marriage is a fortress and widows stray solitary in the open fields, picking up stones, gleaning a few golden straws, lonely, unprotected, poor creatures. Mrs. Flanders had been a widow these two years. (JR, p. 3.)

The novel is a study of the complex perceptual reality of the individual, a literary attempt to describe what happens between us and the world pointing towards a phenomenology of fiction. In creating the 'room' that Jacob Flanders inhabit Virginia Woolf puts in focus the space of interaction, observing at once both how difficult it is to understand our surroundings and the other, and how we always yet desire that understanding and continuously sketch a web around that which is not ourselves. In the context of contemporary distraction, plurality of cultures and the breaking down of ideologies, architecture should make possible the weaving of that web, allow a multiplicity of meanings and let the inhabitant be active in making the building speak. In Woolf's novel it is Jacob's room that is the space of interpretation, there is a person, a specific personality, but yet he is so rich in meanings read through the others that his 'room' and himself are together a complex and inexhaustible riddle.

'Jacob! Jacob!' – A cry for a pair of shoes ...

In the beginning, throughout the novel and in the end, we hear this cry. First, when Jacob is a child playing on his own, and lost on the beach, his brother, Archer, tries to find him.

In the end, when Jacob is already dead and beyond reach, his close friend Bonamy, cries out in the empty space. Jacob Flanders is the most absent character in the book, yet it his around him that the web of reality is woven. It is the others' desires and his worldly possessions that put the text in motion and make real his 'room'. What we see of Jacob is fragments of his encounters in life from early childhood to his death in the First world war. His mother is Mrs. Flanders, widow and mother of three sons; Archer, Jacob and John. The main settings are Scarborough, Cambridge, London and a voyage through Europe to Greece.

> 'Ja-cob! Ja-cob!' shouted Archer, lagging on after a second.
>
> The voice had an extraordinary sadness, pure from all body, pure from all passion, going out into the world, solitary, unanswered, breaking against rocks – so it sounded. (JR, p. 4.)

> 'Jacob! Jacob!' cried Bonamy, standing by the window. The leaves sank down again. 'Such confusion every where!' exclaimed Betty Flanders, bursting open the bedroom door. Bonamy turned away from the window. 'What am I to do with these, Mr. Bonamy?' She held out a pair of Jacob's old shoes. (JR, p. 155.)

The pair of shoes is a powerful image, containing in itself the whole problematics of the novel. Shoes bear the trace of their owner in such an intimate way as if they were, in themself, the very matter of the absence. Maybe, the question seems to be, can we ever come closer than to this shell, this web that is woven, reaching for the naked foot we are left with the abandoned shoe? The answer to the question would probably be from Virginia Woolf both yes and no, from Jaques Derrida a no, interpreting his text on Van Gogh's shoe painting:

> But an army of ghosts are demanding their shoes. Ghosts up in arms, an immense tide of deportees searching for their names. If you want to go to this theatre, here's the road to affect: the bottomless memory of a dispossession, an expropriation, a despoilment. And there are tons of shoes piled up there, pairs mixed up and lost.[20]

Virginia Woolf makes the question more complex. I would think that in Jacob's case we can never reach him as a whole, as the 'Jacob', but it does not mean that we cannot catch glimpses of him, reach beyond the pair of shoes for short moments. As with the material reality of our perceptions, the psychological realities of ourselves are shifting and unanchored. What is manifested in between these realms is what is open for our interpretation and the place where we can find some temporal stability. It is here that we find and seek meaning, not in the truth of matter, nor in the truth of the self. But this space could never exist without the continuous radiation from the matter and the charging power of the self.

> It is no use trying to sum people up. One must follow hints, not exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done. (JR, p. 24.)
>
> But something is always impelling one to hum vibrating, like the hawk moth, at the mouth of the cavern of mystery, endowing Jacob Flanders with all sorts of qualities he had not at all – for though, (...) half of what he said was too dull to repeat; much unintelligible (...); what remains is mostly a matter of guesswork. Yet over him we hang vibrating. (JR, p. 61.)
>
> But how far was he a mere bumkin? How far was Jacob Flanders at the age of twentysix a stupid fellow? It is no use trying to sum people up. One must follow hints, not exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done. Some it is true, take ineffaceable impressions of character at once. Others dally, loiter, and get blown this way and that. Kind old ladies assures us that cats are often the best judges of character. A cat will always go

to a good man, they say; but then, Mrs. Whitehorn, Jacob's landlady, loathed cats. (JR, p. 135.)

These extracts from the texts are just a few of many reiterations of how 'Jacob' could ever be found; observing the impossibility as well as the desire for doing it. The first sentence above; *It is no use* ... comes back in the end with exactly the same formulation, it is the narrator speaking, taking us through this actual landscape of life – because it is life itself that the novel tries to capture. Life as it lives through an individual, life as it manifests itself outside of the self and as it leaves traces in material existence. I think it is here we may begin our journey back to the world of built reality. In the text is given a key to this reading, the narrator searches a map with 'passions', and what she seems to intend is a map where time is included, where possibilities of actions and their outcome is thinkable, even if not predictable. The text is a projection of this process of mapping, a fictive space is created in which our actions can be inscribed.

> The strange thing about life is that though the nature of it must have been apparent to every one for hundreds of years, no one has left any adequate account of it. The streets of London have their map; but our passions are uncharted. What are you going to meet if you turn this corner ? (...) As frequent as street corners in Holborn are these chasms in the continuity of our ways. Yet we keep straight on. (JR, p. 82.)

Monuments, Letters and the Mind

Before leaving *Jacob's Room* one of the most frequent metaphor should not be left untouched. Text and architecture are in different contexts likened to a mind, dissolved from its body. The written text is as much as the artifact a material trace of human intentions and actions. Before considering some distinguished architectural monuments that are contained within Jacob's room I wish to consider the role of the letter, as discussed in the novel, in order to provide the understanding of text as given here. The question of the mind's relation to the body, or if that is a way to see it, is prevalent throughout the text. The narrator calls us to 'consider letters' and remarks that with them the 'power of the mind to quit the body is manifest', she even calls them 'phantoms of ourselves', 'an attempt to speech'; "Venerable are letters, infinitely brave, forlorn, and lost."(JR, p. 79). Letters, or words, are 'what lace our days together and make of them a perfect globe'. The task of the letter and other kinds of communication is to 'carry the voices that try to penetrate before the last card is dealt and the days are over'. But there is doubt in the voice of the narrator, the questions come up of the possibility of ever knowing, ever sharing. It is the journey of life she is describing and she says that bound together by notes and telephones, the journey might be less lonely and perhaps, she says – "we might talk by the way".

> Well, people have tried. Byron wrote letters. So did Cowper. For centuries the writing desk has contained sheets fit precisely for the communications of friends. Masters of language, poets of long ages, have turned from the sheet that endures, to the sheet that perishes, pushing aside the tea-tray, drawing close to the fire (for letters are written when the dark presses round a bright red cave), and addressed themselves to the task of reaching, touching, penetrating the individual heart ! Were it possible ! But words have been used too often; touched and turned, and left exposed to the dust of the street. The words we seek hang close to the tree. We come at dawn and find them sweet beneath the leaf.[21]

At some places in the novel, reality is likened to images and text, rude illustrations in a book, as though reality had transformed into suspended fiction, frozen moments possible to capture again and again. Or is it that reality has turned into a continuous flow so that whatever

happens will always return, in one way or another? In the following passage it is almost as if Virginia Woolf is anticipating our contemporary society of 'ecstatic communication'[22]. We turn those pages and the narrator asks what we search. 'It is the same with books' she says, and carries the reader into Jacob's room where he sits reading the Globe:

> He propped his face in his hand, so that the skin of his cheek was wrinkled in deep folds. Terribly severe he looked, set and defiant. (What people go through in half an hour ! But nothing could save him. **These events are features of our landscape. A foreigner coming to London would scarcely miss seeing St. Paul's.**) He judged life. These pinkish and greeninsh newspapers are thin sheets of gelatine pressed nightly over the brain and heart of the world. They take the impression of the whole. (JR, p. 84; my bold.)

St Paul's cathedral appears in the novel as the nave of London, not so much a space as a landmark and monument. In *Orlando*, a novel written six years later and with a very different tone,[23] the dome of St Paul also plays a role, here at first mistaken as a poet's forehead, the rational mind, maybe quasi-rational. This image seems to be persistent since it is these allusions that dominates the view of this monument as well as the British museum in *Jacob's Room*. These monuments gives a possibility for the narrator to speak upon time-less or general matters, the associations they evoke or the people that inhabit them offer this chance. It is a double charging of both the material forms and spaces that are evoked through fiction and of the depiction of the characters that thus are effected. An illustration of the power of Virginia Woolf's writing is given here by a series of quotations, with small interlusions to put the texts in context.

> The proximity of the omnibuses gave the outside passengers an oppurtunity to stare into each other's faces (...) Each had his past shut in him like the leaves of a book known to him by heart; and his friends could only read the title, (...) Oh yes, human life is very tolerable on the top of an omnibus in Holborn, (...), and if there is such a thing as a shell secreted by man to fit man himself here we find it, on the banks of the Thames, where the great streets join and St. Paul's Cathedral, like the volute on the top of the snail shell, finishes it off. (JR, p. 53, 54.)
>
> Nothing could appear more certain from the steps of St. Paul's than that each person is miraculously provided with coat, skirt and boots; an income; an object. (JR, p. 55.)

St. Paul is thus introduced as a container for man, a shell within which he can keep his secret and impenetrable past but also for the generalisation of man, all passengers of omnibuses, the multitudes of urban life, the universalised mask under which all can hide. Jacob is distinguished from the 'multitudes' but is at the same time presented amidst them in the alienated urban reality that he enters at this stage of the novel. The next time St. Paul is encountered it is through the experience of firelight. The image is powerfully set as if to threaten the secure shell of the dome, the protection of the character, and within the same image Florinda is introduced, the finer prostitute, who is one of Jacob's women. With the British Museum the metaphor is clearer and the text moves between the building, its contents, the image of the vast mind, Jacob's reading of *Phaedrus* and ultimately Jacob's own mind. This is the richness of man's presence made manifest in human culture, it is there to study but only as signs of a whole, and in its essence, it is impenetrable:

> But the fact leads you all day (...) into this density of thought, this conglomeration of knowledge. (JR, p. 93.)
>
> There is in the British Museum an enormous mind. Consider that Plato is there cheek by jowl with Aristotle; and Shake-

speare with Marlowe. This mind is hoarded beyond the power of any single mind to possess it. (JR, p. 93.)

The rain poured down. The British Museum, stood in one solid immense mound, very pale, very sleek in the rain, not a quarter of a mile from him. The vast mind was sheeted with stone; and each compartment in the depth of it was safe and dry. (JR, p. 94.)

Stone lies solid over the British Museum, as bone lies cool over the visions and heat of the brain. Only here the brain is Plato's brain and Shakespeare's; the brain has made pots and statues, great bulls and little jewels, and crossed the river of death this way and that incessantly, seeking some landing, now wrapping the body well for its long sleep; now laying a penny-piece on the eyes; now turning the toes scrupulously to the East. Meanwhile, Plato continues his dialogue; in spite of the rain; in spite of the cab whistles (...). (JR, p. 94.)

The dialogue draws to its close. Plato's argument is done. Plato's argument is stowed away in Jacob's mind, and for five minutes Jacob's mind continues alone, onwards, into the darkness. (JR, p. 95.)

Why I bring this up is because it clearly demonstrates the evident power of fiction to recreate the depth of the physical reality. It is not only the British Museum that is possible to take as an object for such a pulling it out from the illusion of 'objective reality'; writing is one way to consciously consider the space moving between the object and the subject, and present as such in our field of action. The last example of architecture described in this humanly charged way is drawn from the last section of the novel, where Jacob is visiting Greece and the ancient monuments. Here Acropolis and Parthenon are presented in the context of a love-affair that Jacob has with an older, married woman, Sandra Wentworth Williams. The monuments stand, classically, for the possibility of immortality and beauty on earth, but taken together with the anticipation of Jacob's death and the transient quality of love, the question of what remains becomes broadly deepened.

There they are again, (...) directly you unlatch your shutters in the morning and, leaning out, hear the clatter, the clamour, the whip cracking in the street below. There they are (JR, p. 130).

The extreme definiteness with which they stand, now a brilliant white, again yellow, and in some lights red, imposes ideas of durability, of the emergence through the earth of some spiritual energy elsewhere dissipated in elegant trifles. But this durability exists quite independently of our admiration. Although the beauty is sufficiently humane to weaken us, to stir the deposit of mud – memories, abandonments, regrets, sentimental devotions – the Parthenon is separate from all that; and if you consider how it has stood out all night, for centuries, you begin to connect the blaze (...) with the idea that perhaps it is beauty alone that is immortal.

Added to this, compared with the blistered stucco, the new love-songs rasped out from the strum of guitar and gramophone, and the mobile yet insignificant faces of the street, the Parthenon is really astonishing in its silent composure; which is so vigorous that, far from being decayed, the Parthenon appears, on the contrary to outlast the entire world. (JR, p. 130.)

But to return to Jacob and Sandra.

They had vanished. There was the Acropolis; but had they reached it? The columns and the temple remain; the emotion of the living breaks fresh on them year after year; and of that what remains ?

As for reaching the Acropolis who shall say that we ever do it, or that when Jacob woke next morning he found anything hard and durable to keep forever ? (JR, p. 141.)

These questions lead us through to the end, undoubtedly to Jacob's death, which is evident first on the last page where his room is presented as that which outlasted him. His room is given the same characteristics as he himself once was given, it has 'distinction'. The bills are paid, what remains is his room, his letters and his shoes. These last words contain the sadness of the moment, yet they signify the condition that has been present throughout the search for Jacob, the question remains, is there a difference, dead or alive ?:

> Listless is the air in an empty room, just swelling the curtain; the flowers in the jar shift. One fibre in the wicker arm-chair creaks, though no one sits there.

Notes

1. The concept of Democracy has wide connotations. In this specific context it is discussed with the contemporary western understanding in mind, but in the context of the paper as a whole the understanding of democracy is more idealistic: That political system which, while keeping 'society' as a stable structure of individuals living together, does not suppress the individual with any pregiven hierarchical system and allows for constant change from within.
2. To avoid misunderstanding I want to make clear that the use of reason, when written as 'reason', in the following intends 'absolute' reason.
3. Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, I: p. 136, II: p. 135.
4. First published in 1922.
5. Gianni Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, pp. 45–61.
6. Martin Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?", *Basic Writings* p. 105.
7. Written in 1935–36, in the collection *Poetry, Language, Thought*, pp. 15–88.
8. "What is Metaphysics", *Basic Writings* p. 105–106.
9. The analysis of nothing is based on "What is Metaphysics", while having *The Origin of the Work of Art* as well as Gianni Vattimos interpretations of Heidegger's aesthetic theory as a background.
10. Lebbeus Woods: 'Monument'. From the Zagreb Free Zone Collages 1991. In "Freespace and the Tyranny of Types" in *The End of Architecture?; Documents and manifestos*, p. 87. Ed.: P. Noever. Prestel Verlag, Zürich, 1993.
11. "What is Metaphysics", *Basic Writings*, p. 111.
12. Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, Chapter 1.
13. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in *Illuminations.*
14. Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, chapter 3.
15. "The world has become a fable", Nietzsche in *Twilight of the Idols,* referred to by Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, p. 24.
16. Lines from a collection of anonymous poetry censured, and in many cases severely damaged by the Bismarck-regime in 19th century Germany.
17. *The Transparent Society*, Chapter 4.
18. Sue Roe, Introduction to the 1992 Penguin Edition of *Jacob's Room.* Virginia Woolf writes about this question in the essay "Modern Fiction" in *Collected Essays*, Chatto and Windus, 1966.
19. Virginia Woolf, *Jacob's Room*, p. 60. (In the following quotations will be assigned by 'JR' and page number.)
20. Jaques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, Chapter 4; 'Restitutions of the truth in pointing', pp. 330–331.
21. It is interesting to notice that in this passage Virginia Woolf's analysis of her situation as a writer, distinctly different from the past 'centuries' but also, even if more vaguely,

different from the romantic age of Byron, with the dream of penetrating into the heart, comes very close to the overall diagnosis Roland Barthes makes in his 1953 seminal work; "Writing Degree Zero". The possibility of transparency of the poetry of the classical age is due to the belief in something outside of society; God and Nature. When the task is to capture that which already is there, the question of a personal mode of writing does not yet exist, the writer is a medium not an inventor. On modernism he says, what also seems to correspond with the struggle throughout *Jacob's Room*, that "Modernism begins with the search for a Literature which is no longer possible" (...) "What must be destroyed is duration, (...), the binding force running through existence: for order, whether it be that of poetic flow or of narrative signs (...)" (...) "the greater modern works linger as long as possible, in a sort of miraculous stasis, on the threshold of Literature ..." (W. D. Z., p. 38). Compare this to the founding and unfounding as discussed above.

22. Title of Semiotext(e)'s edition of *L'Autre par lui-même*, Jean Baudrillard, New York 1988.
23. *Orlando* is interesting in relation to *Jacob's Room* in that it is also an attempt to catch a character that seems always floating away and out of hand, and in its conscious relation to the problem of time. There is a difference in approaches: While *Jacob's Room* has a more searching, only subtly ironic, nature; *Orlando* is openly ironic and critical to the issues that even though addressed in the earlier novel is now clearly put up on the surface.

This article was originally written as a paper for a Graduate seminar course in Architectural Theory for Prof. Alberto Pérez-Gómez at McGill University, Montreal. Financial support of this work has been given by The Royal Academy of Science, Sweden.

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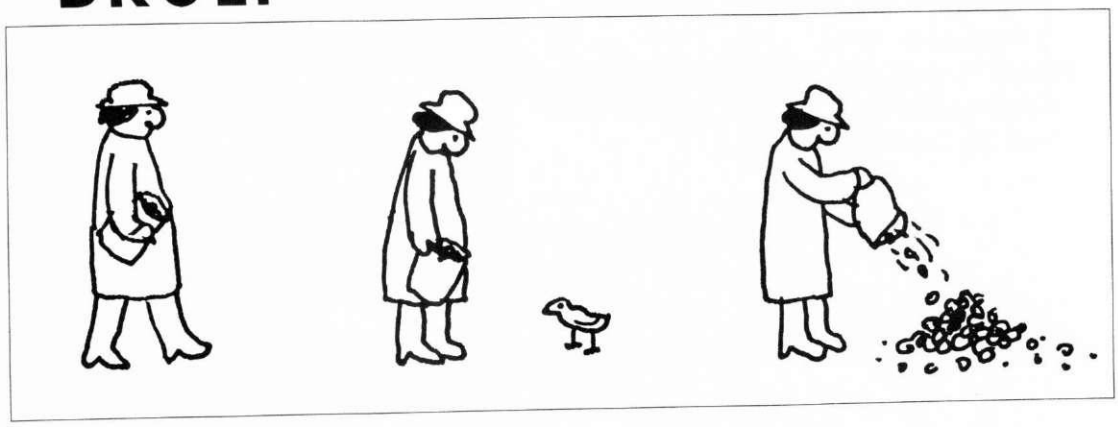

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