

**MANFREDO TAFURI'S NOTION OF HISTORY
AND ITS METHODOLOGICAL SOURCES:
From Walter Benjamin to Roland Barthes**

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ABSTRACT

The essay is an analysis of Tafuri's theory on historiography; it traces his methodological sources: the theories, and their mode of reception, that have directly influenced his thought. The period examined starts with *Theories and History of Architecture*, first published in 1968 and ends with "The Historical 'Project'", the introductory essay of *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, published in 1980.

The first chapter outlines the intertwining of the two neo-idealist and Marxist components of Tafuri's thought, combined with the early familiarity with the writings of the *Nouvelle Critique*. Subsequently, it identifies the points that, in *Theories and History*, represent Tafuri's original contribution to architectural history: the identification of architecture as ideology and the consequent demystifying role that the historian must play; consequently, the formulation of the specific notions that will serve as the instruments for this task of the historian; the identity of history and criticism; the complete separation of the design process from the 'reading' process (i.e. history writing) of a building; the logical consequence of this: the 'futility' of history and theory in design; and, finally, the obsolescence of the mode of criticism termed "operative criticism".

The second chapter tackles the problem posed by the contradictory coexistence, in Tafuri's later writings, of Marxist and neo-avant-garde positions. It analyzes in detail what neo-avant-garde ideas were, what they implied and what theoretical and methodological purposes they served. The analysis centers on the strong impact of Foucault's theories on Tafuri, and his equally strong criticism of them. Most importantly, however, it outlines the profound impact of Walter Benjamin's notion

of history, particularly as exposed in "The Theses on the Philosophy of History", on Tafuri.

In the last chapter, are drawn some partial conclusions on the epistemological implications of Tafuri's theory.

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Introduction

Tafuri's notion of history is a crucial one in the contemporary debate on architectural history. This essay intends to be a contribution to an understanding of Tafuri's theory on historiography by tracing its methodological sources. I will attempt to expose the theories, and their mode of reception, that have directly influenced Tafuri's thought. In so doing, I hope to set off and emphasize the original elements of Tafuri's notion of history and criticism; and to outline the reasons and importance of their *difference*.

Tafuri's aim is to formulate a theory of historiography that would represent a critique of reality; that would become, in other words, an instrument of the class struggle. From the very outset, his writings assume the shape of a critique of ideology. In his early works, ideology is viewed as the mystification that the dominant class operates in order to trap the dominated class into the illusion of "naturalness", of the god-given and immutable structure of things. This notion of ideology and, consequently, Tafuri's strategies in opposing it, however, undergo a

radical transformation under the influence of theorists such as Althusser and Foucault. This transformation, from a more traditional Marxist view of ideology, to a position more clearly linked to some notions of Post Modern theories, is evident in the later writings of Tafuri. It is this intellectual trajectory that I will attempt to trace.

The period that I will be examining, in order to do so, begins with the book that earned him immediate international fame, *Theories and History of Architecture*, first published in 1968. The period ends with "The Historical 'Project'", the introductory essay of *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, published in 1980. I will dedicate the most significant part of my analysis to these two theoretical writings.

In the first chapter, I will outline the intertwining of the two neo-idealist and Marxist components, combined with the early familiarity with the writings of the *Nouvelle Critique*, of Tafuri's thought. Subsequently, I will identify the points that, in *Theories and History*, represent Tafuri's original contribution to architectural history: the identification of architecture as ideology and the consequent demystifying role that the historian must play; consequently, the formulation of the specific notions that will serve as the instruments for this task of the historian; the identity of history and criticism; the complete separation of the design process from the 'reading' process (i.e. history writing) of a building; the logical consequence of this: the 'futility' of history and theory in design; and, finally, the obsolescence of the mode of criticism termed "operative criticism".

In the second chapter I will tackle the problem posed by the contradictory coexistence, in Tafuri's later writings, of Marxist and neo-avant-garde positions. Tomas Llorens, who mentions this coexistence,

simply attributes it to a peculiarity of Italian intellectuals following the crisis that Marxist thought underwent, around 1968. I think it is worth analyzing in greater detail what these neo-avant-garde stances were, what they implied and what theoretical and methodological purposes they served. It is necessary to note that with the term 'neo-avant-garde', I am referring to the set of ideas that characterized a significant part of Italian intellectual production starting from the very early 1960s. This set of ideas has a lot in common with so-called 'Post Modern' or 'Post Structuralist' theories. The reason I do not use the latter term is, for one reason, that by 'Post Structuralism' one tends to refer to a French school of thought whose major exponents are Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Secondly, because there are few, but extremely significant differences, as we will see, between this school and its Italian counterpart.

In order to examine the neo-avant-garde and Marxist components of Tafuri's thoughts, I will analyze the strong impact of Foucault's theories on Tafuri, and his equally strong criticism of them. Most importantly, however, I will outline the profound influence of Walter Benjamin's notion of history, particularly as exposed in "The Theses on the Philosophy of History". I will demonstrate how the *Theses* provide an important stepping stone for Tafuri's passage from a more traditional Marxist view of reality, ideology and its critique, and history writing, to a "Post Modern" stance on these issues and, subsequently still, to the historiographical notions of the *Annales*.

In summary, by tracing Tafuri's theoretical trajectory between 1968 and 1980, by identifying in it the constants and the variants, I hope to emphasize Tafuri's contribution as an at least partial answer to the

questions we are all concerned with. The questions, that is to say, on how one writes (architectural) history. The answers to be found in Tafuri's writings will hopefully prevent us from having to recur to the "small treatise" he declares in an interview he had "thought of writing":

a series of rules with which to write an architectural criticism with success.

First principle: don't look at the work constructed but get a friend to describe it to you over the phone. Second: start the article with the quotation of a philosophic text - a good opportunity to show off a knowledge that has not gone down - but that is as far as possible from the cultural atmosphere of the work itself. Third: tell everyone about history, showing immediately afterwards - with wrong quotations - that you are completely in the dark. None will notice the error, and you'll earn yourself an invitation from Portoghesi to the Piper.¹

¹. Fulvio Irace, "Domusinterviews 9: Manfredo Tafuri", in *Domus* 653, 1984, p. 26.

CHAPTER 1

Architecture as Ideology: *Theories and History of Architecture*

Tafuri's notion of history is based on the fundamental concept that identifies architecture as ideology. His notion of ideology will evolve through time, especially under the influence of Louis Althusser's writings, but the equation between architecture and ideology will hold true throughout his writings. In *Theories and History* his notion of ideology is, in many aspects, still an orthodox Marxist one: ideology is false "consciousness", it is "the process through which the bourgeoisie transforms the reality of the world into an image of the world, History into Nature."²

Before we explore this further, it is necessary for us to schematically outline some notions of Marxist theory that will better help us understand Tafuri's argument.

². Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972, p.141.

The Dialectical Nexus: Reality versus Appearance

Marxist orthodox thought postulates the existence of an objective core of "reality", covered by a thick, mystifying shell of "appearances". What we perceive directly, what appears before our eyes, is only this unmediated external image of reality. The form this image assumes, however, is determined by the reality that is producing it. There is, consequently, a necessary and direct connection between the "core" and the "shell", between reality and its appearance. It is therefore possible to trace a path back to reality through its appearance and the relations that the former has with the latter.

The ultimate determinants of social reality are, for Marxist thought, the relations of production of a society. Only the full recognition of reality's structure as the interacting totality of these relations will allow us to pierce the illusory veil of appearances. Only the perspective obtained through the awareness of these hidden ultimate economic causes, will grant us an undeformed knowledge of reality.

Understanding the true nature of things, however, according to Marxist thought, also means being aware of their historical nature. It means understanding, in other words, that the economic and social relations of production are not universally valid, eternal, categories but were, instead, generated by specific historic conditions. Consequently, these socio-economic relations are subject to change. Understanding the true nature of social institutions, then, also means understanding their essential character through, and beneath, their historical metamorphoses.

The only valid approach to an understanding of our society is through a "historical synthesis" which will take into account both the

relations between the present reality of social institutions, and the forms they have assumed, and the historical metamorphoses that they have undergone.

In order to achieve such an understanding of social reality, the only valid methodological approach is a dialectical one. The dialectical method, and the essence of the Marxist conception of knowledge, is constituted essentially by the movement from the façade of appearances to the underlying essences and then back to the surface again, which will this time be perceived "not as a chaotic conception of a whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations"³

In understanding the significance of the dialectical back and forth movement, it is important to bear in mind that the façade of appearances behind which reality hides is not simply a mass of irrelevant or random facts that have to be discarded in order to recognize patterns, regularities, essential laws and generalizations. What need to be pierced are the *systematic* - political, social, economic - distortions that constitute the illusions or delusions imposed on us by the ideology of our society's dominant class, the bourgeoisie.

To return to Tafuri's thought: architecture is part of the ideological construct of the dominant class of society. It is a discipline "*historically conditioned and institutionally functional to ... the 'progress' of the ... bourgeoisie*".⁴ A work of architecture is, for Tafuri, the physical

³ . Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, New York: Penguin Books, 1973. Cited in Robert Heilbroner, *Marxism: For and Against*, New York: Norton, 1981, p.45.

⁴ . Manfredo Tafuri, *Theories and History of Architecture*, New York: Harper & Row, 1980, p. 236. Quotations are generally taken from the English translation but have been modified, often to a relevant extent, when it was deemed necessary.

embodiment of the values of the class that had it constructed. It is the formal configuration of the "message" that the bourgeoisie wants to convey, of the myth that it wants to perpetuate.

But architecture (i.e. ideology) is only a part of reality, albeit an interacting part of it. Neither reality, nor architecture, can be understood if one is not aware of the part played by the latter in the former. Only the overall perspective, granted by the perception of the web of relations that connect the interacting parts of reality, can grant us a correct understanding of each individual component of reality. Only through the realization that architecture is a part of the system of interrelations that link it to the components of social reality, can we understand architecture's true nature. Without the realization of the role that architecture has in the structure of society, of the functions it performs, of the part it plays in it, we cannot hope to understand architecture's own specific character. Even less can we hope to achieve an undeformed understanding of the totality of reality, thus forsaking all hopes of *changing* it. Which is ultimately the goal of Marxist, as well as Tafuri's, thought. "Historical activity ... becomes 'criticism of architectural ideologies' and, as such, 'political' activity - even if indirectly political."⁵

Shifting our focus from architecture as a discipline to a specific work of architecture, it then becomes clear why, for Tafuri, one cannot select a privileged parameter with which to judge a work. Architectural criticism is not possible through only one of the constitutive characteristics of a work of architecture: typology, techniques and

⁵. Tafuri, *Theories...*, op. cit., p. 236.

relations of production, its relations with nature and the city. *All* of these parameters have to be considered in order to achieve a historical synthesis that, alone, will guarantee the understanding of reality. In Tafuri's words:

The only way to describe the structures of architectural language seems to be through historical synthesis. All the naive attempts to single out a component from the complex heap of architecture and elect it as a parameter of architectural language, are bound to fail before the impossibility of outlining a complete history of architecture in this way. Neither the functions nor the space of the tectonic elements can be at the base of an ... analysis of planning.⁶

In this passage Tafuri already states, in a nutshell, the idea that will form the basis of his thought on what historical analysis is, or should be. The notion that the analysis of a work cannot be separated from that of its context is certainly not a new one, in art history. The particular viewpoint from which this context is considered, however, definitely is. Tafuri will develop and expand this notion throughout his intellectual trajectory, gradually modifying it. In 1983, explaining the method used in the analysis of the 16th century Venetian church of San Francesco della Vigna, designed by Jacopo Sansovino, he writes:

How can one explain the choices of Sansovino, without questioning oneself on the interlacing of religious components and of political choices of those that support his sculptor's and architect's activity? ... Does it perchance make any sense to continue analyzing the work of Palladio - the great rival of Sansovino's and, not by coincidence, the architect that will be called to substitute him on the construction site of the church - without exploring the reasons of the 'party'

⁶. Tafuri, *Theories...*, op. cit., p. 227, 228.

of patrician venetians that have a predilection for him? And how great a part is played, in the choices that determine this remarkable substitution, by motivations that pertain to the biography of the client and the new political (postridentino) climate?⁷

At this point, it is already clear what criticism's first task is, for Tafuri: the revelation of the specific ideological (i.e. mystifying, distorting) purpose that a work of architecture serves. Consequently, architectural history can be nothing else but the restitution, as far as possible, of the original functions and ideologies that defined the role and the meaning, that each work of architecture had in its own social and historical context.⁸

In what he considers to be the first task that criticism must accomplish, Tafuri will find a powerful ally in the set of ideas elaborated by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*. It is worth analyzing in greater detail the notions of this text that directly relate to Tafuri's "project" and that are therefore readily coopted by him.

The dominant theme of *Mythologies* can be schematically, but I think accurately, described as the necessity, and the ability, for semiology to serve as an instrument for revealing the character of contemporary society, which is entirely enmeshed in the illusory nature of myth.

For Barthes, myth is a system of communication, a message. It is a deceitful message, however, one that deforms the concept lying behind

⁷. Antonio Foscari and M. Tafuri, *L'armonia e i Conflitti. La chiesa di San Francesco della Vigna nella Venezia del 500*, Torino: Einaudi, 1983, p. 59, my translation. The term 'postridentino' refers to the particular political asset of the region to which Venice belongs, formerly known as the 'Tridente'.

⁸. See 'Tafuri, "The Tasks of Criticism" in *Theories...*, op. cit.

the fact that it represents. The signified, the concept, is distorted by the content of the message of myth. Myth operates by offering to its consumer an image that is so shallow in content that it is comprehensible at first glance. The image constructed by myth "goes without saying"; it appears so "natural" that it need not be questioned, or explained. By this very mechanism, myth "naturalizes" concepts and makes them appear eternal, indisputable, god-given. The acceptance of myth, by making the myth consumer content with the deformed image that he accepts as a self-evident truth, "does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible".⁹

Myth, then, is the perfect instrument for the project of the dominant class, the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie distorts reality into ideology; transforms historical, purely contingent values into eternal, immutable ones; transforms, in other words, History into Nature. Myth is a tool perfectly adapted to this purpose. It "has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal. Now this process is exactly that of bourgeois ideology."¹⁰

The critique of this process can be achieved through the demystifying powers of semiology. It is through semiology that one can decipher myths and uncover the true meaning of the facts that they portray. It is necessary to become "a reader of myths" if "one wishes to connect a mythical schema to a general history, to explain how it

⁹. Barthes, *Mythologies*, op. cit., p.143.

¹⁰. Idem, p. 142.

corresponds to the interests of a definite society, in short to pass from semiology to ideology."¹¹

The means to do this is through the analysis of *forms*. "Semiology is a science of forms": it is a science which presupposes a relation between the signified and the signifier and, therefore, the possibility to trace one's steps back to the concept through its sign. Or, to be more precise, through the form that this signifier has assumed.

In what appears as a paradox, Barthes states that in order to get to the "true" concept hiding behind a fact one has to analyze the form it assumes, i.e. its apparently most superficial aspect, rather than the content of a fact. Because the content of the message of myth is what is meant for us to be seen, and is therefore deceitful.

Less terrorized by the spectre of 'formalism', historical criticism might have been less sterile; it would have understood that the specific study of forms does not in any way contradict the necessary principles of totality and History. On the contrary: the more a system is specifically defined in its forms, the more amenable it is to historical criticism. ¹²

For Barthes, therefore, mythology is a part of two sciences: of semiology, since it is a formal science, and of ideology, "inasmuch as it is an historical science: it studies ideas - in - form."¹³

Barthes' Marxist stance can be most clearly perceived in his ideas on the nature of myths, and on the revealing, demystifying function of semiology. The affinity that these notions bear with Tafuri's own agenda is obvious. In architectural criticism, the necessity to

¹¹. Idem, p. 128, 129.

¹². Idem, p. 112.

¹³. Ibidem

discover the meaning of events and things, derives from the discovery that we are among *signs*, conventions, myths, that offer us artificial processes as natural, that manifest themselves as innocent images or rites just where they are least disinterested, and that carefully hide their meanings. From this comes semiology's frantic search for meanings; and it is up to us to make it a *new science* with a formidable capacity for demystification, or to let it become another transient fashion under the flag of evasion.¹⁴

Barthes' influence on Tafuri is twofold: conceptual and terminological. In *Theories and History* Tafuri still believes he can find in semiology a powerful demystifying instrument, one that can be utilized in writing an architectural history that will trace the path back from the *forms* to the *meanings* behind them, to the ideologies that they represent, or to the "utopias that they embody", to use an expression of his.

Parallel to Tafuri's Marxist beliefs on the nature of reality and on the part that architecture plays in it, run his beliefs on the nature of the specific work of art or architecture. Just as he believes social reality to be constituted by a core of relations that ultimately determine its structure, he believes the work of art to be ultimately constituted by a nucleus of "true" meanings, coated by the layer of interpretations that the ages, through which the work has passed, have deposited on it.

This shift in scale from architecture as a discipline, to a specific work of architecture is possible, for Tafuri, by his neo-idealist formation.

¹⁴. Tafuri, *Theories...*, op. cit., p.174.

The Neo-Idealist Legacy

Tafuri is, in fact, a student of Giulio Carlo Argan first in Rome, at the Faculty of Architecture, and then at that of "Humanities". Argan is, by formation and age, a neo-idealist, and his intellectual stature and role in Italy must not be underestimated.¹⁵ Tafuri, however, is also a heir of the theories and ideas of Benedetto Croce, the Italian philosopher. During the immediate pre- and post war period Croce and his brand of idealism - or neo-idealism, as it was called - and his writings on aesthetics and historiography dominated to a great extent the works of art historians in Italy, all the way to the early 70s. Until, in other words, the definitive affirmation of neo-avant-garde theories. The influence of neo-idealism can be clearly detected in *History and Theories*, even though Tafuri moves an explicit critique to it in various passages of the book.

One of the other major notions of neo-idealism is the idea that there exists a "true essence" of art which can be found in an inner core of, or in an ideal image of, the work of art. The various interpretations or judgements of the work may be more or less "true" or "correct". More or less close, in other words, to the revelation of this inner essence of the work of art.

For Croce, the ideal 'essence' of the work of art survives unchanged the passage through the ages of history. The judgement to be expressed on a work, then, must first of all establish whether the work is, or is not, a 'Work of Art'. The only category according to which one has to

¹⁵ For a brief outline of the influence that Argan's concepts exercised over Tafuri, see Jean Luis Cohen, *La coupure entre architectes et intellectuels, ou les enseignements de l'italophilie*, "In Extenso/1", Recherches à l'Ecole d'Architecture Paris-Villemin, Paris, 1984.

express this judgement, is that of Beauty. If a work partakes of this ideal category, then it can be judged a work of Art or of "Poetry"; if not, it is then only "Literature", to use Croce's metaphor. A work of "Literature" is not devoid of any value but it cannot claim for itself the right to become part of the History of Art: only "true" works of art can claim that right.

History and criticism, therefore, coincide: if criticism does not consider a work as being a work of *art*, the work will not become a part of history. The value judgement implied by criticism, then, "writes" history, establishes the path of history and its trajectory.

To "write" criticism then, is to "write" history. Vice-versa, history cannot be written without expressing a choice, making a value judgement as to what works of the past are "Art" and have to be included in history. Consequently, the reverse of the first postulate is also true: to write history is to write criticism.

For Tafuri too, the work of art possesses an inner nucleus of meaning or "values" which is the historian/critic's task to reveal:

With the change of interpretative codes, the *meaning* of that particular work changes also: even if the various messages, successively read in it, pivot round a nucleus of permanent values.¹⁶

But this is as far as the affinity with neo-idealist theories goes, for Tafuri.

Tafuri's "fundamental postulate: the identification of criticism with history" seems at first sight identical with that of Croce's.¹⁷ And it is probably statements like this one that earned him the accusation of

¹⁶. Tafuri, *Theories and History* ..., op. cit., p.180.

¹⁷. Idem, p. 172.

being still imbued with idealist theories.¹⁸ It is, however, sufficient to examine the paragraphs that immediately follow the quote to realize how gross a misjudgment this interpretation is:

Any attempt to separate criticism and history is artificial and hides an unconfessed conservative ideology. To relegate criticism to a limbo, given to abstract analyses of the present - as if there really existed a 'present' time, quite apart from historical time - means accepting the ransom demanded by the most transient and mystifying ideologies.

Criticism always wrenches the present from its daily context simply by looking for its meanings and its reasons. And it is impossible to define those meanings and those reasons without reinserting the artistic event into the structures of history.¹⁹

It is clearly from a Marxist standpoint, and not a Crocean one, that Tafuri asserts the identity of criticism and history. To understand this it is sufficient to keep in mind the Marxist idea that our interest in history is determined, in the last analysis, by our desire to know the present. Conversely, understanding our present time cannot be achieved without an understanding of the historical motives that have brought about the present state of things. It is within this logic that Tafuri states that: "we have known for quite a while now, that there does not exist a historical reading that is not conditioned by our commitment to the present. [And that] one does history of architecture because one is searching for the meaning of present architecture."²⁰

¹⁸. See Tomas Llorens, "Manfredo Tafuri: Neo-Avant-Garde and History" in *Architectural Design* 51, 1981.

¹⁹. Tafuri, *Theories...*, op. cit., p. 196

²⁰. M. Tafuri, *Teorie e Storia dell'Architettura*, Bari: Laterza, 1968, p. 200-201, my translation. The official English translation, fooled by the double negation that is common in the Italian construction of sentences, erroneously and amazingly translates it as "We have known for quite

What we end up with, at this point, is a Tafuri that has an essentially neo-idealist notion of the work of art, or architecture, and a Marxist methodological approach to the criticism of a work.

Tafuri still believes, in *Theories and History*, in the "primacy of the work of art", albeit with some provisos.²¹ He believes, in other words, in the existence of a core of "permanent values" of the work which survives unchanged through historical ages. The readings that the historian makes of a work will be more or less close to this "truth" of the work; more or less subject to "misunderstandings" of the message of the work.

Tafuri, however, also clearly states that he is not interested in "metaphysically flavored" investigations on what the "essence" of a work of art is, nor in an "historicistic aesthetic" which is what a neo-idealist stance would amount to. He declares the "irreversible crisis of any definitory aesthetics based on a static and metaphysical conception of 'art'."²²

Tafuri's notion of criticism is a more dynamic, dialectical one. The truth of the work, for Tafuri, can be discovered by the back and forth movement between the nucleus of eternal meanings and the layer formed by the changes in meaning that the work of art has undergone in history.

It is a curious compound of neo-idealist notions of the work of art and Marxist notions on the necessity for the awareness of historical transformations which social facts undergo, then, that accounts for

a while now that historical reading is not conditioned by our commitment to the present." (*Theories...*, op. cit., p.175).

²¹. Tafuri, *Theories ...*, op. cit., p. 213

²². Tafuri, *Theories...*, op. cit., p. 172.

Tafuri's statement on architecture that, he says, "shows continually that the very basis of its existence is in the unstable balance between a nucleus of permanent values and meanings, and their metamorphoses in historical time."²³

Tafuri's thought, as we have thus far considered it, seems formed by these two components whose cohabitation is not contradictory: Hegel and his idealism, in fact, play a major role in both Marxism's and neo-idealism's genealogical trees. But there is a third element in this apparently bipolar system: it is that constituted by the *reading* of a work of art. In other words, by the meanings attributed to a work through the various interpretations that it has been subjected to. On the structuring warp and woof of neo-idealist and Marxist conceptions, then, the threads of more recent theories on the interpretation of a work of art are woven.

The Interpretation of the Work of Art

Tafuri proves to be very aware of the cultural debate going on in France, and of the most advanced theories on the interpretation of a work: *Theories and History* explicitly acknowledges the revolutionary contribution of Roland Barthes' *Critique et Verite'*, published in 1966.

Critique et Verite', which is an answer to Raymond Picard's pamphlet *Nouvelle Critique ou Nouvelle Imposture* in which Picard had attacked Barthes' essay *Sur Racine*, is Barthes' theoretical manifesto on what constitutes (literary) criticism. In the first part of the book, Barthes attacks the strongholds of traditional criticism:

²³. Tafuri, *Theories ...*, op. cit., p. 178.

"Objectivity", "Taste" and "Clarity". In the second part, he exposes the reasons and concepts of "New Criticism": criticism's task is not to uncover *the* meaning of a work/text. There is no single meaning that has been put into a work by its author. A text is a field where multiple meanings, symbols, modes of writing, come together. The space where this plurality is reunited, however, is not the author, the emitter of the message, but its receiver, the reader. There is not, it logically follows, *a* meaning of the text that must be discovered through its "correct" interpretation. There is rather a multiplicity of meanings to be discovered in it. Admittedly, the critic cannot just "say anything" and there are coercions and limits that regulate his critical activity. Provided it operates within these coercions, however, criticism can produce an endless number of meanings. Criticism is a means of generating sense, of "putting meanings into the world"; for this reason, and because there isn't a goal of "objectivity" to be attained by criticism, as traditional critics believe, there is no reason, Barthes argues, for us to ever stop talking about Racine or Shakespeare.

Tafuri does not follow Barthes along this line of thought. The infinite proliferation of meanings of a work is not accepted by him. He somewhat unconvincingly claims that while this proliferation is possible in literary criticism, which operates in the same medium (language) as that which it criticizes, the same is not possible in architectural criticism that has to find, instead, its critical instruments within its own disciplinary field.²⁴

²⁴. Tafuri, *Theories....*, op. cit., p. 125.

Actually, Tafuri accepts from Barthes the idea that a work of art that consists in a system of communications, that it is a message. But he still believes in the existence of a "true" message of the work. The core of the work of art, that which historical analysis must uncover is, for Tafuri, constituted by the original *message* of the work, by the "utopias it embodied", in the age in which it was built, for the society in which it took form. The fact that the core is constituted by the message of the work and not by its "essence" (or "reality") distinguishes Tafuri's thought from both neo-idealism and Marxism. Tafuri's "core" is a less firmly grounded, objective, "solid" core. It is a core that has to be read, deciphered, interpreted. The hypotheses that can be formulated on it have a provisory character and need to be constantly verified. But this core is still, nonetheless, a nucleus of "true" meanings of the work which the critic must constantly try to define, by a process of successive approximations, slowly narrowing the circle of definitions, until he has established what the work is not, as well as what it is.

For Tafuri, if the first task of criticism is a demystifying one, its second task is that of the verification of its own hypotheses. With a term that is a key-word in Tafuri's terminology, "self-verification" (*autoverifica*), he states the necessity for criticism to define a field of possible meanings. Criticism has to provide its own parameters of control, set its own boundaries; it has to set the limits of the field into which an interpretation of the work of art is not only possible but "reasonable", "fruitful", or "functional".

The interpretations that history deposits on the work are layers that must be taken into account too, but not all as equally valid, as New Criticism would state. They must be historicized and interpreted

themselves, alongside the work. The history of the criticism of a work, Tafuri says, will provide us with the necessary parameters of control for the validity of our own interpretations, for the "truth" of our criticism. The analysis of the history of criticism of a work will define precisely a field of "possible" meanings and, therefore, interpretations of the work. This field of possible meanings can be visualized by the trajectories traced by the back and forth movement between the core of eternal meanings of the work of art, and the layer of previous interpretations that history has accumulated on it.

Both *Mythologies*, *Critique and Verite'*, and their contributions to his theory, are explicitly acknowledged by Tafuri. But while *Mythologies* has a profound impact on all the theory of Tafuri, the ideas that Barthes elaborates in *Critique*, serve Tafuri mostly as a limit, a boundary against which he states his own differing views.

We can at this point recognize Tafuri's notion of architectural criticism as a system which comprises two poles, constituted by the two tasks of criticism. The first task is a quest for truth; it represents a notion of historical criticism whose task is to arrive at the true meaning of the work through the deceptive veil of appearance. This first task expresses the belief that there *is* an objective truth that can be discovered, below the distracting and mystifying layer of ideology. That architectural works *do*, in other words, have a central core of meanings, and that they are a product of the social and historical context in which they appeared. Through the understanding of the *toile de fond* that this context provides, and the work of art's relations to the backdrop, we can hope to unveil the nucleus of "true meanings" of the work.

The second task of criticism, the second pole of this system, consists in the necessity, for criticism, to define its own boundaries, its own limits of interpretation. Because there is no guarantee of objective truth, there can only be interpretations, fragments, partial truths. In exposing his views on this second task, Tafuri clearly does not see criticism as being anchored to any objective "truth" or "reality". The kind of truth that criticism can provide us with is a floating, expanding and contracting truth. The field set up by the oscillation between these two contradictory poles of the system, is the space where the discourse on the works of architecture can take place.

One last issue that needs to be examined is Tafuri's critique of the (then) dominant mode of doing criticism: "operative criticism". The critique of operative criticism, which occupies a central part of *Theories and History*, represents a milestone in architectural criticism in the Italian debate of the post-war period. It is through this critique that Tafuri lays down some of his precepts on criticism's shoulds and should nots. It is for this reason that the examination of this episode of the debate on architectural criticism retains much of its importance and has more, I think, than a purely documentary value.

The Critique of Operative Criticism

Operative criticism is an:

analysis of architecture (or of the arts in general) that, instead of an abstract survey, has as its object the planning of a precise poetical tendency, anticipated in its structures and derived from historical analyses programmatically distorted and finalized.

By this definition, operative criticism represents the meeting point of history and planning. We could say, in fact, that operative criticism *plans* past history by projecting it towards the future.²⁵

Operative criticism flourishes, Tafuri says, in periods when a stasis and a stagnation in the arts render necessary "a new courage, stimulated by criticism". Operative criticism will act on past ages transforming them into mythical ones, endowed with ideal values, and designate them as models for future planning. It will transform, in other words, meanings into forms. ("What is characteristic of myth? To transform a meaning into a form.")²⁶

The other instance in which operative criticism flourishes is when newly born avant-garde movements need the support of a committed historiography. Operative criticism will attempt to identify, in the past, mythical ages that will provide both a source of inspiration for future planning and a precedent, a historic legitimization for the present. Finding a precedent for Wright in Genoa's Palazzo Rosso, for Tatlin in Borromini's San Ivo Church or for Kahn in the arches of Roman bridges are all examples of what Tafuri calls naive attempts to "actualise history".²⁷ In the attempt to transform history into a "supple instrument" for planning, these historians will project their own personal hopes, dreams, and ideologies on history, ultimately

25. Tafuri, *Theories ...*, op. cit., p. 141.

26. Barthes, *Mythologies*, op. cit., p. 131.

27. It is interesting to note that these "naive attempts" have not died out. David De Long, speaking recently at the Louis Kahn Symposium on Dhaka, held at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on October 26-27, 1991, spent a considerable amount of time trying to identify the Roman ruins and the Egyptian pyramids (for the triangular forms) that Kahn inspired himself to.

deforming and distorting it, in an attempt to make it operative. Instead of writing history, Tafuri says, they make ideology.

However, those that "include, in the same history, a Roman Triumphal Arch and a project for urban renewal" are also searching for a point of origin, and constructing a history that is a linear sequence of facts, linked by an internal logic and a series of cause/effect relations that will lead it to a final goal or purpose.²⁸ The analysis of the ages that *precede* us will indicate, according to operative criticism, what *future* planning will be. Will indicate, in other words, the next form that our age will "logically" assume.

Tafuri moves a clear critique to these beliefs, based on on a notion of history that is no longer teleological. History proceeds by ruptures, breaks, discontinuities, revolutions. It is therefore "sterile for planning", it cannot provide us with a source of models for design precisely because it is *not* linear, consequential, evolutive. "Hope in a new world rests on faith in violent fractures, the jump into the dark, the adventure accepted without reserves." The planning of the new, for Tafuri, is "a radical reshuffle of the data of the problem." What is deformed and not sufficiently taken into account, in a historical analysis based on the idea of an "evolutive continuity of visual modes" and the concept of art, is the revolutionary value of the avant-gardes and "the fractures introduced by them at all levels."²⁹

It is necessary, at this point, to make a brief digression in order to situate this critique in the debate that was going on in Italy, in the 1960s. Tafuri was part of a movement whose founders were Ludovico

²⁸. Tafuri, *Theories ...*, op. cit., p. 228.

²⁹. Idem, p. 230, 233.

Quaroni and Ernesto Nathan Rogers. The movement, which comprised, among others, Vittorio Gregotti, Aldo Rossi and Ignazio Gardella, revolved around the journal *Casabella*. This group of younger architects and historians acted in opposition to the older school of thought on art and architecture, headed by Bruno Zevi.

The latter group identified itself with the progressive ideals of the modern movement and tried to establish a relation of continuity with it. In order to do so, it had to clear the tainted image that the modern movement derived from the close connections that it had with Fascism, in Italy. To accomplish this, Zevi (notably in *Storia dell'architettura moderna*) constructed a history that saw the modern movement as an enclave of antifascism, as an example of resistance and opposition "from inside". In this view, the main figures of the Italian modern movement are depicted as heroic individuals that attempt to propound their ideals of progress and rationalization in the face of a corrupt, and reactionary, regime.

Tafuri too, "salvages" the figure of Giuseppe Terragni, the designer of the Casa del Fascio in Como. But he does it through a *formal* analysis of his work. He argues that Terragni was completely detached from the political reality of his time. And that his work sent no "message" to it, for he was only concerned with the formal perfection of his work.³⁰

It is keeping this in mind, that we can more clearly see the place occupied by the critique of "operative criticism" in the architectural debate of the 1960s, in Italy. We can thus realize how it was based on

³⁰ See Dennis Doordan, "Changing Agendas: Architecture and politics in Contemporary Italy" in *Assemblage* 8, 1989, p. 65-67.

the very concrete problem posed by the interpretation of a specific historical period. Or, in other words, how it was based on ideological rather than purely theoretical reasons. One cannot, in fact, go without noting that a critique of an operative history implies the (idealist) belief that there actually exists an "objective" narration of history. Tafuri will, however, modify his views on it; and in 1980 he will re-direct his attack against the prescriptive characteristic of such a model of criticism.³¹

There is a thing that both groups have in common: it is the involvement in a research that strives to define the potential transformations of historical analyses into instruments for the design process.³² Through his critique of operative criticism, Tafuri definitely wipes away all hopes for such a "instrumentalization" of history. He does this against the beliefs of the members of the group to which he himself belongs, and against his own personal attempts and explorations in that direction. Tafuri closes a personal cycle of research of his and clears the air from misconceptions on what history cannot accomplish, thus laying the bases for his investigations on what history's tasks are, and what instruments are available to it in order to accomplish them.³³

³¹. M. Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1987, p. 16.

³². Bruno Zevi is the leading intellectual figure in the group of historians that propounds 'operative criticism'. It is against him that Tafuri moves his most direct attack, in *Theories and History*. That notwithstanding, Zevi is at the head of the commission which appoints Tafuri to the Chair of Architecture History at the Architecture Institute of Venice, evaluating precisely *Theories and History*. Incidentally, Tafuri and Zevi are also first cousins.

³³. T. Llorens' is a misjudgment fostered by inattention, when he declares that Tafuri is continuing his search for 'design methods' in *Theories and History* which "crowns Tafuri's effort to give an answer to the architect who addresses himself to history in search of a programme or, at least, of some theoretical guidance." Llorens, *Architectural Design* 51, op. cit., p. 85.

Tafuri declares the necessity for the complete separation between the instruments of planning and those of criticism, and this is perhaps his major contribution to architectural criticism. Historical analysis does not provide the architect with "an additional pencil". It cannot be placed "on the drafting board of the architect, aligned with the other materials of his work". Tafuri rejects such a use of history and "not because the instrumentalisation of history is *wrong*," but simply because he has another notion of the "utility" of history in designing.³⁴ For those that attempt to practice an operative criticism, history provides both a legitimization and an indication of formal choices. For Tafuri, instead, history's function lies in the positing of new problems, in bringing to light new contradictions. History poses questions, does not indicate solutions. Rather than furnishing the designer with "another pencil", it will render more evident to him the responsibilities he assumes in creating new formal worlds.

The reason that makes it worthwhile our re-examining these concepts, after more than two decades, lies in the fact that the notion that the act of *designing* a building is totally distinct from the act of *reading* it, is a notion that is fundamental to the discipline of architecture in both of its "manifestations". However, this is a lesson that has not been entirely learned yet.

The idea that the creation of new forms does not occur by a gradual artistic evolution, but rather by a sudden shift in the way that artists are able to "see" or "say" new forms, might be a concept that is accepted without reserves by now, in art history. But in architecture, the

³⁴. Tafuri, *Theories...*, op. cit., p. 233.

attempts to find direct instruments of design in history, or theory, are far from being extinct.³⁵ One has only to think of so-called "Deconstructivism": the attempt to transfer theoretical notions, usually reductively understood and even more reductively applied, to the making of buildings. Or, before that, to "Post Modern" architecture to which Jean-François Lyotard had to publicly contest homogeneity with his own theories.³⁶ Or, again, to Bernard Tschumi's attempts to derive some formal guidelines directly from Barthes' *Le Plaisir du Texte*, for instance.³⁷

It is therefore from our interest in the present state of architectural criticism that the necessity stems for the analysis of the critique of operative criticism stems. Operative criticism, in the way Italian critics intended it, may be completely obsolete by now. But the points which Tafuri makes in his critique of it represent a necessary basis from which to proceed. Unfortunately, these points have not yet been entirely accepted.

The concepts we have just outlined are Tafuri's contribution, in 1968, to the debate on architectural criticism and represent the reason he attains immediate international fame.

³⁵. Incidentally, the complete separation between the sphere of design and that of criticism is necessary also from the opposite viewpoint. Colin St. John Wilson, speaking recently at M.I.T., reduces himself, in examining a building, to talking of 'magical spaces' and 'mystical experiences' and of the 'ineffable genius of the architect' in a repetitive babble that communicates nothing.

³⁶. Jean-François Lyotard, "Ripetizione, complessità anamnesi" in *Casabella* No. 517, 1985; cited in M. Tafuri, *Storia dell'Architettura Italiana*, Torino: Einaudi, 1982 and 1986, p. 184. [Eng. trans.: *History of Italian Architecture: 1944 -1985*, Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1989.

³⁷. See Louis Martin, Transpositions: On the Intellectual Origins of Tschumi's Architectural Theory" in *Assemblage* 11, 1990.

Tafuri's whole project can be viewed in this light: as a constant struggle to define the limits of criticism but, by that very means, to define its discursive field and thus better define the roles it can accomplish. He clearly states the necessity to separate criticism from design. Having stated the "futility" of the former for the latter, he goes on to define the field, the role and the tasks of criticism. The first task is the most fundamental of all: it concerns the purpose and meaning of criticism. One has to make architectural criticism in order to establish a fragment of truth; in order to uncover at least a zone of the mystifying layer of ideology on reality. The second task, instead, is one instrumental to the activity of criticism itself. Criticism's self-verification poses limits to its own activity that regulate and control the veracity of its own postulates.

Finally, it is important to note that Tafuri is not reverting to older notions on the necessity of the analysis of the context of a work of art. He is not advocating analyses based on a crude social determinism *`a la* Hauser, which he considers obsolete. He is attempting an analysis of the *forms* of architecture, inasmuch as they embody the *meaning* of a work. According to Tafuri, architecture works are the physical embodiment of the utopias of those that built them. Architectural history is the "reading" of these "stone utopias" in their own time frame.

It is, of course, important to situate historically *Theories and History*. To see it, in other words, partly as a product of the faith in a commitment that would revolutionize the whole structure of society - prior to the disillusionment of the intellectual Left after the events of 1968. In the 1960s, revolution seemed imminent and the idea that

intervention in the "superstructure" could affect the "base" or, in other words, that art criticism or historical analyses could actually affect and cut deep into the skin of reality, seemed absolutely feasible. To this, one has to add the notion that Tafuri held, in common with the German architectural avant-garde, on the role of intellectuals as they whose task it is to clear the path of history, and guide the revolution. *Theories and History* is Tafuri's contribution to the revolution, by defining the part that architectural criticism could play in it. Defining, in other words, the instruments that would render architectural criticism a "class critique", thus transforming it into an instrument of class struggle and an ally in the revolution against capitalist society.

The only possible way is the exasperation of the antitheses, the frontal clash of the positions, and the accentuation of contradictions. And this ... in the hypothesis of a radical change that will leave behind ... the anguished present situation.

In the present situation, in fact, the critic is "obliged to 'despair of finding the solution'".³⁸

Some of the points outlined above give us enough reasons, I think, for us not to consider this text an obsolete one. Attributing a certain revolutionary naivete' to Tafuri does not invalidate the whole of his methodology.

38. Tafuri, *Theories...*, op. cit., p. 237.

CHAPTER 2

Architectural History as a Montage

Tafuri, like practically all of the Italian intellectual Left in the 1960s, adheres to neo-avant-garde positions. These two theoretical foundations (the Marxist and the neo-avant-garde) of Tafuri's notion of history pose a problem, with their contradictory epistemological coexistence, which needs careful analysis.

The Marxist theory bases itself, as we have seen, on notions of "reality" versus "appearance". In Marxist terminology, the quest for scientific knowledge means a quest for "objectivity" or "truth". And traditional Marxist historiography harbors faith in "progress", in an evolutive, teleological model of history.

A neo-avant-garde position entails beliefs that are in complete opposition to Marxist ones: that on the impossibility of attaining (or, rather, non-existence) of *the* truth, or *the* meaning of a work; the notion that knowledge is not an "objective" block of facts that need only to be collected, but rather that it is fragmentary and subject to interpretation; and in the arts (and, consequently, in their history) the

notion that forms do not change by a gradual evolutive process, but rather by breaks and revolutions.

The problem posed by the coexistence of these two sets of ideas was solved, for Tafuri, by another Marxist theorist: Walter Benjamin. It is through the bridge provided by his writings - so much earlier on - that Tafuri and his colleagues are able to join in an extremely fruitful symbiosis, the two systems of thought. It is no coincidence that Benjamin's influence is so profound on the School of Venice. And abundant traces remain: from 1964 to 1972, Massimo Cacciari and Marco De' Michelis published *Angelus Novus*, a journal inspired by the Klee painting to which Benjamin refers in his writings on the 'philosophy of history'. In *Nuova Corrente*, in 1975, Cacciari published, in 1975, "*Di alcuni motivi di Walter Benjamin (da 'Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels' a 'Der Autor als Produzent')*" ["On some motifs in Walter Benjamin (from 'Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels' to 'Der Autor als Produzent'")]. And Tafuri himself, as we will see, makes frequent and explicit reference to Benjamin's concepts.

Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History"³⁹

Many of the themes contained in this essay had already appeared in much of the later work of Benjamin. But the *Theses* represent a culmination of these themes and contain all of the elements of a modern theory of historiography.

³⁹. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968.

A significant part of the essay consists of the critique of the traditional notions of historiography which Benjamin identifies as "historicism", as opposed to an "historical materialist" view of history.

Historicism, Benjamin says, empathizes with the victors of the past and writes *their* history. The historical materialist, instead, must detach himself as much as possible from the history of the victors. The cultural treasures that are handed down by tradition are suspect to the historical materialist. They are the "spoils" carried by the victors in their triumphant procession. Benjamin realizes that it is necessary to find other ways of dealing with the past. He is aware of the break in tradition and of the irrevocable loss of authority of the past that occurs in his time. He knows that it is his task to "brush history against the grain": to write, in other words, a counterhegemonic history.

The way to write a counterhegemonic history, for Benjamin, is by extracting from the "pile of wreckage" that is bourgeois history, "fragments" with which to construct a different history. These fragments are the "rags" and "refuse" of history. That which has been discarded or overlooked, that which has not been tampered with and that, precisely for that reason, still possesses the precious quality of authenticity. Wrenched from the context in which they are embedded, the fragments are then re-assembled; but this time, in such a way as to yield a different, more authentic "truth". Benjamin's mania as a collector of quotations easily comes to mind. With more than six hundred collected, Benjamin dreamed of constructing a novel that would consist only of quotations, with nothing else in between.

With all the fragments salvaged from the past, Benjamin wants to reconstruct a 'truer' text of history. And what better way to destroy the monument that bourgeois tradition has erected to itself, and handed down to us, than by extracting the valuable parts hidden in it and recomposing them in heretical fashion?

Method of the project: literary montage. I have nothing to say. Only to show. I will steal no valuables, nor appropriate any clever turns of phrase. But the rags, the refuse: not in order to take stock of them but to use them - which is the only way of doing them justice. ...

The first step of the way will be to apply the principle of montage to history. To erect large constructions from the tiniest, sharply fashioned materials. Indeed to discover the crystal of the total event in the analysis of the small, discrete moment, thus breaking with vulgar versions of historical materialism.⁴⁰

This passage is from the *Passagen-Werk*, the nearest that Benjamin got to his dream of constructing a text that would only consist in a *collage* of quotations. One of the metaphors of the *Passagen-Werk* is that which identifies the historian with a "*chiffonier*", a rag-picker. Living at the margins of society, the rag-picker finds and treasures that which society has thrown out. He transforms the refuse into things that are useful to him.

The feature that assures the validity of the fragments is their *smallness*. It is in the analysis of the "small, discrete moment" that the

⁴⁰. Walter Benjamin, "Das Passagen-Werk", vol. 5 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, Frankfurt am Main, 1974-82, p. 174-175. Cited in Irving Wohlfarth, "Et Cetera? The Historian as Chiffonier" in *New German Critique* 39, Fall 1986, p. 144-46.

"crystal of the total event" can be discovered. It is in the overlooked, insignificant (to a traditional historiography) microevents of history that one can find the essence of an era. In other words, the "crystals" are valuable not because they are *part* of the whole but because they encapsulate, or *mirror* the whole. When the materialist historian identifies one, he extracts it or, to use Benjamin's words, "blasts it" out of the "homogeneous course of history - blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this method the lifework is preserved in this work ... in the lifework, the era; and in the era, the entire course of history."⁴¹

The identification of these crystals of history is the exact opposite of the procedure by which the historicist strings facts together "like the beads of the rosary".⁴² In the *Theses*, Benjamin defines these privileged kernels of significance in time as moments when the unhindered flow of thoughts on history "suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad." ⁴³

The historical materialist, for Benjamin, must only concern himself with monads. The reason for this is that the knowledge of the past must be relevant to us, today. And monads are precisely those moments in time that can provide us with inspiration or stimulus to action, in our current situation. Thus, he says, "to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he blasted

⁴¹. Id., p. 263.

⁴². Ibidem.

⁴³. Id., p. 262, 263.

out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate." ⁴⁴

To history, the historical materialist gives political pregnancy. While "historicism gives the 'eternal' image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past."⁴⁵ With one of the quotations that he wrenches out of its context, Benjamin very clearly states it: "We need history, but not the way a spoiled loafer in the garden of knowledge needs it."⁴⁶ We need history because history is filled with the 'time of the now' (*Jetztzeit*).

We can attempt to understand this "time of the now" by resorting to theology. In Judaic theology, redemption (the messianic and apocalyptic end of history, when mankind will be re-united with God) could have happened anytime in the past; it might happen now, or in the future. Thus we can attempt to understand Benjamin's notion of "monad": as a time when revolution could have occurred but did not. Chronology is eliminated as the monads, charged with political valency, are collapsed together and are simultaneously - synchronically, one is tempted to say - present. Benjamin's early studies in linguistics can provide a key to understanding this notion. He transfers the idea that all the meanings that a word ever had are contemporaneously present in its current meaning, into a notion of history conceived of as the synchronic existence of a "constellation" of monads.

⁴⁴. Id., p. 261.

⁴⁵. Id., p. 262.

⁴⁶. Id., p. 260.

This constellation is the molecular like structure that our own time forms with specific past ones, to which it is tied by links of political valency. This construct is the opposite of the historicist's flattened out, dimension-less representation of history. Historicism's indiscriminate collection of facts, amassed one after the other, is the liquidation of history. Historicism renders history innocuous, castrates it, empties facts of their potential for the present by classifying and inserting them in their proper (chronological) place, in the smooth and tranquil flow of history. The historical materialist, instead, "does not let himself be "drained by the whore called 'Once upon a time' in historicism's bordello" and remains "man enough to blast open the continuum of history."⁴⁷ This is because in every monad he recognizes "the sign of the Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past."⁴⁸ Perhaps nowhere else has Benjamin more explicitly expressed what Joan Ockman has called his "ultimate aim": "nothing less than a redemption of humanity through the reconsecration of history's disenfranchised, a transmutation of the Judaeo-Christian myth of the meek inheriting the earth into a Marxian end of history."⁴⁹

There is no doubt that Benjamin's notion of history is an operative one. For him, the parts in history that hold revolutionary potential must be identified and extracted in order to be used for their political significance ("which is the only way of doing them justice"). While the positivist historicist fears that a value judgement will mar his

⁴⁷. Id., p. 262.

⁴⁸. Id., p. 263.

⁴⁹. Joan Ockman, "Reinventing Jefim Golyscheff: Lives of a Minor Modernist", in *Assemblage* 11, 1990, p. 97.

objectivity, the historical materialist is animated by a moral fervor. Benjamin intends, in a truly Marxist sense, to provide more than a way of understanding history, he intends to show the way of *making* it.

The historical materialist must "make history explode": likewise, and in parallel fashion, the oppressed class, the "depository of historical knowledge", the "avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of the downtrodden", must make the present moment explode.⁵⁰ Benjamin's essay is a call to arms for revolution; "it is our task," he says, "to bring about a real state of emergency."⁵¹ We can no longer harbor hope in a history that moves through ever increasing thresholds of progress towards its ultimate goal: "redemption", or the Marxist utopia of a classless society.⁵²

Benjamin writes a withering critique of one of the strongholds of the Marxist theory: that of the notion of "progress" in history. Marxist traditional historiography entails being convinced that the inherent contradictions existing in capitalist society will increase, as capitalism advances, until its integument will "burst asunder". Through the historical agency of the proletariat, acting like the secular arm of history, revolution and the consequent "dictatorship of the proletariat" will occur, as a transient phase towards a classless society. This belief ultimately entails having faith in a transcendental Design of history; in

⁵⁰. Benjamin, "Theses...", op. cit., p. 257.

⁵¹. Id., p. 257.

⁵². I subsequently found confirmation to this statement in a sentence that appears in a preliminary study of the *Theses*. The sentence reads: "In the concept of the classless society, Marx secularized the concept of the messianic age. And that was as it should be." Cited in Rolf Tiedemann, "Historical Materialism or Political messianism? An Interpretation of the Theses 'On the Concept of History'," in Gary Smith ed., *Benjamin*, Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1989, p. 187.

a guiding hand that will lead the course of history through a sequence of ever increasing stages of progress.

For Benjamin, such a staunch faith in the progress of history can no longer be held without catastrophic consequences. His attack is directed against the Social Democrats, the official party of the Left, those that still hold on to a belief in the inevitable progress of humanity. The Social Democrats, Benjamin says, hold a view of progress that is the "progress of mankind itself (and not just advances in man's ability and knowledge)". They also believe in a progress that is boundless, "in keeping with the infinite perfectibility of mankind." Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, progress is pictured in the minds of the Social Democrats "as irresistible, something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course."⁵³

The danger in continuing to harbor faith in a transcendental Design of history that would inevitably and "irresistibly" guide it through ever greater and perfected stages of "progress", must have been evident with horrifying clarity, to Benjamin, in the Spring of 1940, when the *Theses* are written. Benjamin saw happening before his eyes, not only the early victories of the fascist states but, perhaps even more devastating, the series of treaties between Germany and the Soviet Union that culminated in the Hitler-Stalin pact of non aggression. The contingent historical situation provides us with a very concrete key for the understanding of the subversion, by Benjamin, of this most fundamental of Marxist tenets.

⁵³. Id., p. 260.

Those that still harbor faith in progress are precisely those politicians "on whom the opponents of Fascism had placed their hopes" and who are instead "betraying their own cause". In Thesis X, as Tiedemann points out, these politicians are the Stalinist bureaucrats in the Soviet Union and the Social Democrats at home, in Germany. Benjamin's attack is directed on two fronts, but the enemy is the same: the orthodox conception of historical materialism.

We can at this point identify the elements in the *Theses* that constitute, very early on, a modern theory of historiography:

1. The renunciation to a positivistic notion of history that believes it can attain "objectivity" by collecting all the facts. "To articulate the past historically" Benjamin says, "does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger."⁵⁴ The whole quote of Ranke, reads: "History has often been assigned the task of judging the past so as to teach one's contemporaries for the benefit of future years. The present work makes no such exalted claims; it wants only to show how things actually were."⁵⁵ While Ranke's was an attack against a politicization of history, Benjamin uses his quote to re-affirm the need for the politicization of history.

2. The lucid realization that believing in the teleological thrust of history or, in other words, regarding history as a series of cause/effect relations is mere illusion. "Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical

⁵⁴ Id., p. 255.

⁵⁵ Wohlfarth, *New German Critique* 39, op. cit., p. 180.

posthumously, as it were."⁵⁶ History, in other words, is the logical construct of the historian. But the awareness of this, the realization of the fact that with his "fragments of thought" Benjamin is constructing a montage and not the "objective" narration of how things "really were", gives Benjamin a vantage point of departure.

3. Benjamin's history is counterhegemonic in both senses, epistemological and revolutionary. Writing the history of the obliterated and the oppressed is obviously a "history that brushes against the grain" of the account of the "victors" and fits perfectly with the "Judaean-Christian myth of the meek inheriting the earth." Some critics of Benjamin have particularly emphasized the point "that the nameless victims of history should finally, one and all, be 'cited' by a 'chronicler' who, according to the *Theses*, 'recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones' (GS, 1, 694); that the historian should be a 'herald who invites the shades to table' (GS, V, 603); that no one should be left out of that beggar's banquet; that all the insulted and the injured should have their day in court - a Day of Judgement which, in its very indiscriminateness, would suspend all judgement".⁵⁷ One would not, however, be giving Benjamin his due if one did not understand that his history is also counterhegemonic in a perhaps more important, and fruitful, epistemological sense. It is the idea, a very modern one, of salvaging the small, forgotten and hitherto voiceless parts of history. "A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be

⁵⁶. Benjamin, "Theses...", op. cit., p. 263.

⁵⁷. Wohlfarth, op. cit., p.160.

regarded as lost for history."⁵⁸ In this, he is a precursor of that history of material civilization that the *Annales* will theorize: a minor historiography, one concerned with the history of men, rather than that of Man. What is known as a *histoire non-evenementielle*, concerned with the history of techniques, of everyday events, rather than with the great, political events of history.

4. And finally, a history that is not a smooth, flowing, evolutive model of history. I do not think it would be an exaggeration to already see in this the history made of discontinuities, epistemological breaks and revolutions that will not be theorized by Louis Althusser, until the mid 1960s, and then so fascinatingly utilized by Foucault in the narration of his genealogies. Once more, it is important to note that the importance of Benjamin's historiographical notions does not lie only on in their epistemological or political originality, but in an intertwining of both. Thus, a history that is written as a series of discontinuities also represents a model of socio-political praxis. In fact, "the continuum of history is that of the oppressors" ⁵⁹ If he is to write the history of the oppressed, instead, the historical materialist must realize that this history "is a discontinuum". This "discontinuum" Benjamin ascribes to the voicelessness of those that did not prevail in history. Their "anonymous toil" which did not get recorded by traditional history, preoccupied with the succession of the significant events in the realm of political or cultural history. Benjamin's aim is not an improvement in the methods and instruments of (historical) knowledge *per se*. For Benjamin, and his project of a political

⁵⁸. Benjamin, "Theses..." op. cit., p. 254.

⁵⁹. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, op. cit., p.1236. Cited by Tiedemann, op. cit., p. 199, 196.

alternative for the present situation, it is necessary to "generate" an "interrelationship between historiography and politics". (1248, Tied. p. 196) Benjamin's scope is to write a "new history" that will generate an alternative project of political praxis.

Like Brecht's plays, Benjamin's history is not an organic, homogeneous work that must be viewed as a whole. It is composed of fragments, chosen for their political potential, with which the spectator can individually relate and utilize as political precepts. The fragmentation, the discontinuity invoked by Benjamin in writing the history of the oppressed constitutes, as for the avant-garde work, the very essence of its political valency.

Peter Bürger has recognized in Benjamin's concept of the allegory, as exposed in the *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, a theoretical manifesto of the avant-garde. In parallel fashion, I think the *Theses* can be considered as the theoretical manifesto of an avant-garde theory of historiography in which the theological underpinnings are used in an allegorical sense.⁶⁰

Tafuri's "contradiction" is thus already present in Benjamin: theirs is what we might call an avant-garde notion of history. One that, elaborated by the School of Venice, has since given abundant fruit. Its characteristic is uniting Marxist theory (which most fundamentally

⁶⁰. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 69. "As one attempts to analyze the allegory concept in its components," Bürger says, "the following schema results: 1. The allegorist pulls one element out of the totality of the life context, isolating it, depriving it of its function. Allegory is therefore essentially fragment and thus the opposite of the organic symbol. 'In the field of allegorical intuition, the image is a fragment, a rune....The false appearance (Schein) of totality is extinguished' (*Origin*, p. 176). 2. The allegorist joins the isolated reality fragments and thereby creates meaning. This is posited meaning; it does not derive from the original context of the fragments."

implies a judgment of "right" or "wrong", albeit in a historically determined situation, and not in a universally valid sense) to an epistemological conception that avoids the snares of positivist thinking. It does not assert, in fact, the existence of a single "truth" or the existence of a compact, unified "reality". It states, instead, reality's fragmentary nature and has thus been able to adjust its instruments in opposing it.

I will briefly outline the fundamental notions of the avant-garde idea of art that are relevant to my discussion before I proceed.

The Avant-Garde Work of Art

The bourgeois concept of art views it as an autonomous institution, detached from social reality. The bourgeois concept of the work of art views it as an organic, unified - albeit semantically complex - totality. This conception is suitable for an art whose aim is to interpret and represent reality, but at a distance.

Avant-garde artists, instead, wanted their art to intervene in social reality; they intended their work to have political relevance. There is no doubt that commitment, or moral content, existed in art long before the historical avant-gardes. But the way in which this 'commitment' is expressed is radically different in the two conceptions of art. Let us first examine the traditional, bourgeois (or romantic, or classicist) work of art.

The bourgeois concept of art viewed the work of art as an organic totality, composed of parts each of which is subjected to the totality of the work. Each of the parts concurs and is necessary to constitute the

whole of the work. And it is the whole that assigns to each part the role it plays in the work.

Thus, the moral or political message of such a work is conveyed as the *content* of the work, or its "meaning". But, as Peter Bürger has pointed out, unless this political content is the organizing principle of the work of art, it only becomes an added part and an element of disturbance in the formal unity of the work.⁶¹

If the political content *is*, on the other hand, the organizing principle around which the work is formed, the autonomy and separateness from social reality of the institution of art renders it innocuous: it is "merely" a work of art.

The avant-garde work of art, instead, intervenes in social praxis in a completely different way; a way which is determined by its very nature. The avant-garde work of art is not an organic whole. It is composed by autonomous, independent parts, or fragments, which are not subject to the whole but have emancipated themselves from it. There is no *necessity* in the parts; some of them could be removed, or their sequence inverted, without causing the destruction of the meaning of the work of art; it would simply imply a different one. Meaning is posited by the construction or the assemblage of the various parts of the work. While the organic work of art wished to cover or gloss over its elements of construction, its material underside, the avant-garde work precisely exposes those elements. It exposes its nature as a construct and as an artificial manufact.

⁶¹. Bürger, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

The intent of the bourgeois conceptions of the work of art is to depict reality. The avant-garde's aim, instead, is to make the work of art interact with reality, thus changing it. On what one considers reality to be, however, views diverge. While, for the bourgeois, artist reality might be represented as a compact, homogeneous block, for the avant-garde artist reality is contradictory, heterogeneous, fragmentary.

Perhaps nowhere else are these two opposing conceptions of reality more clearly formulated than in the debate over Expressionism that took place in 1938 between Georg Lukacs and Ernst Bloch. "Lukacs' thought," Bloch says,

takes for granted an integrated and closed totality ... But what if Lukacs' reality - a coherent, infinitely mediated totality - is not so objective after all? ... What if authentic reality is also discontinuity? [Avant-garde art] strives to exploit the *real* fissures in surface inter-relations and to discover the new in their crevices. ⁶²

Lukacs will respond that the crevices are only present on the exterior covering of reality, on the "shell" constituted by appearances. Reality's surface, for him, is smooth and unmarred by discontinuities. Thus, for Lukacs, the task of the realist or organic work of art (as opposed to the avant-gardiste) is twofold: "first, the uncovering and artistic shaping of these connections (i.e. the connections within social reality) and secondly and inseparably from the former, the artistic covering of the connections that have been worked out abstractly - the sublation of the abstraction."⁶³

⁶². Livingstone, Rodney et al., eds., *Aesthetics and Politics*, New York: NLB, 1977, p. 22.

⁶³. Burger, op. cit., p. 72.

A consideration of the argument between these two theorists may help us see more clearly the limits imposed by Marxist realism. The way reality is viewed carries with it logical implications about how one plans to intervene in it. The critique of a reality viewed as an autonomous, compact block of facts that can be objectively understood by an equally autonomous, integral subject will obviously be very different from a critique based on a view of reality as discontinuous, and not objectively existing, before the analysis began.

Equally obvious, then, is the necessity that Marxist theorists felt, as Benjamin and much later Tafuri, to formulate aesthetic and historiographic instruments fit to deal with the new notion of reality. The organic work of art views itself as a compact totality that mirrors or represents an equally compact reality that is, for this very reason, impenetrable to and by the reality it represents. The avant-garde work, on the other hand, allows reality to penetrate it and be discovered through the crevices and fissures that exist between its fragments.

The fragmentary nature of the avant-garde work of art is the very means by which it intervenes in social reality. The unclosed, individual segments of the avant-garde work elicit responses from the recipient of the work. Each of the fragments, because they are independent of the whole, can be extracted by the viewer to be understood and utilized for its political potential and to become a part of his or her reality. Brecht expresses this most lucidly:

"in the aristotelian composition of plays and the acting that goes along with it ... the delusion of the spectator concerning the way events on the stage take place in real life and come about there is furthered by the fact that the presentation of the fable constitutes an absolute whole. The detail cannot be

individually compared with those parts which correspond to them in real life. Nothing must be taken 'out of context' to set it into the context of reality. This is changed by a performance that produces estrangement. Here, the progress of the fable is discontinuous, the unified whole consists of independent parts each of which can and indeed must be directly confronted with the corresponding partial events in reality."⁶⁴

In the closed totality of the organic work, the various parts are signs that engage in a dialogue only within themselves in a closed, circular movement that is impenetrable to reality. In the avant-garde work, the parts are not signs whose reference to reality has been severed. Each part "can and indeed must" be connected back to its corresponding part of reality. And it is up to the spectator to extract the parts and make them correspond by utilizing them as political teachings, examples or precepts. In the avant-garde work, each of the parts carries on a dialogue with the recipients and that is to say, with reality. The aim of the avant-garde artist, then, was to blast the unity of the work of art in order to force its splinters to strike into the flesh of reality.

As for the fragmentary nature of the avant-garde work, it allows political and non-political fragments to exist side by side. The distinction between a "committed" and a "pure" art thus falls. It is the very structure of the avant-garde work that - allowing the political fragments to be "taken out of context" in order to be utilized - is "political".

Thus, unlike in the organic work, in the avant-garde work the political message is conveyed not by the *content* of the work but by its

⁶⁴. Idem, p. 91.

form . Thus the political potential of the avant-garde work is inherent to its very structure; it is implicit in its fragmentary nature and in the cooperation of the "reader" that it requires it to produce meaning.

This considered, it is little wonder that the form that most fully expresses these principles is the montage: a collage of fragments that clearly presents itself as such to its viewer and that, in so doing, invites his or her cooperation in the formation of meaning of the work.

The methodological implications in the criticism of a work, are clear: while the organic work of art requires a hermeneutical approach, one that will be able to decipher the overall meaning or content of the work, the avant-gardist work requires a formalistic one. One concerned not so much with what the work "says", but in how it is assembled. In what its techniques and procedures of montage are. For, as we have seen, it is the structure, the very nature as a montage, that is revolutionary, in the avant-garde work. Accordingly, the attention of the viewer is shifted from the overall meaning of the organic work on to the very visible construction that holds the pieces together. The approach required in the critique of an avant-garde work is thus essentially a formalistic one.

This might begin to sound familiar: Benjamin's interest, in "The Author as Producer", is not in *what* the work of art says of the relations of production (not in the *content*) but in how it situates itself in the relations of production, i.e. *how* it says it, in its technique, in the structure of its construction and the position this has in the modes and techniques of production. Thus the political importance of Benjamin's history does not lie in its content, or not only in that; not only in the meaning that is posited by the montage of the fragments into a

historical construction.⁶⁵ Like Brecht's plays, Benjamin's history is not an organic, homogeneous work that must be viewed as a whole. It is composed of fragments, chosen for their political potential, with which the spectator can individually relate and utilize as political precepts. The fragmentation, the discontinuity invoked by Benjamin in writing the history of the oppressed constitutes, as for the avant-garde work, the very essence of its political valency.

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And this Tafuri fully understands. In "*L'architecture dans le boudoir*", one of the essays of *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, he declares it explicitly. Some of the "most ideological positions" of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", he says, have been completely abandoned by Benjamin in "The Author as Producer". In this essay,

there are no concessions made to proposals for salvation by means of an "alternative" use of linguistic instruments; there is no longer any ideological

⁶⁵. Which would, anyway, be no more and no less "objective" than that of the historicist. Although for Benjamin it is "truer" in that it rights millennial "wrongs".

⁶⁶. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 69. "As one attempts to analyze the allegory concept in its components," Bürger says, "the following schema results: 1. The allegorist pulls one element out of the totality of the life context, isolating it, depriving it of its function. Allegory is therefore essentially fragment and thus the opposite of the organic symbol. 'In the field of allegorical intuition, the image is a fragment, a rune....The false appearance (Schein) of totality is extinguished' (*Origin*, p. 176). 2. The allegorist joins the isolated reality fragments and thereby creates meaning. This is posited meaning; it does not derive from the original context of the fragments."

distinction between a "communist art" as opposed to a "fascist art". There is only a genuinely structural consideration of the productive role of intellectual activities and, consequently, a series of questions regarding their possible contribution to the development of the relations of production.⁶⁷

Tafuri cites Benjamin in support of his own project: that of transferring an avant-garde notion of the work of art to the history writing of works. And his project for an avant-garde historiography is nowhere more fully and exhaustively exposed than in "The Historical Project", the opening essay of *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*.

Tafuri's "Historical Project"

Operating its constructions, history makes an incision with a scalpel in a body whose scars must not disappear; but at the same time, analogous unhealed scars rend the compactness of historical construction, rendering them problematic and preventing them from presenting themselves as "truth".⁶⁸

Tafuri's notion of history converges, on significant points, with the theories of the avant-garde. For Tafuri, just as for Benjamin, there is no such thing as a "true" or "objective" history. The narration of history, in fact, is always a construct of the historian. Thus, the historical model that can be termed an avant-garde history, does not aim to achieve a historical account in which the artificial links between one event and the other do not appear. An account that does not allow its reader to perceive the joints, the fissures beneath its convincingly smooth surface. In the traditional historical account, the smoothness of the

⁶⁷. M. Tafuri, "L'architecture dans le boudoir" in *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, Cambridge, M.I.T. Press, 1987, p. 288.

⁶⁸. M. Tafuri, "Introduction: The Historical 'Project'" in *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, Cambridge: M.I.T., 1987, p. 12.

succession of events does not appear like the construct of the historian but as an effortless "natural" image of history, of things "as they really were". Traditional historiography (like the realist, organic work of art) tries to cover the artificial links of causality between one era and the other and presents itself as the objective account of history. Avant-garde history, instead, brings precisely those elements of construction to the foreground and exposes itself as an artificial construct, as an artifact. This history, like its artistic counterpart, recognizes itself as a montage of "fragments". For Tafuri, the fragments with which he will put together a different history are the same as those of Benjamin's: they are the forgotten, the downtrodden, the obliterated parts of history. In a talk with Jean-Louis Cohen, in 1981, Tafuri will describe the work of historical analysis as the concentric circling around the object of analysis until one discovers "*la tache aveugle sur laquelle il n'y a pas de documentation et qui est bien ce tout petit lieu qu'il s'agit de faire parler* " [the blind spot on which there exist no documents and that precisely is the very tiny spot that one must make speak].⁶⁹ And in 1984 he will reassert the same thing: the instruments of the historian, he says, are fundamentally two: the first is philology and the second, which he calls "eminently modern", is "the one that makes speak not the evident documents but, on the contrary, the silences: indeed the questions will be on the reasons for the silences, the lacks and the blanks and one must preoccupy oneself with making these absences resound."⁷⁰

⁶⁹. J-L Cohen, *La coupure...*, op. cit., p.199.

⁷⁰. Interview with Fulvio Irace, *Domus* 653, 1984, p. 27.

The influence of Benjamin also acts through the intermediation of another historian, Carlo Ginzburg. Tafuri's familiarity with Ginzburg is evident: he begins "The Historical 'Project'" with a quotation by Ginzburg and Adriano Prosperi, two Italian historians that owe much to the historiographic tradition of the *Annales*. The quotation, from *Giochi di pazienza* [Jig-saw Puzzles], compares historical research to a jig-saw puzzle, of which all the fragments are not available. Consequently, the figures that can be created are more than one; and "there is always the risk of using, more or less consciously, the pieces of the jig-saw puzzle as blocks in a construction game."⁷¹ Another example of Ginzburg's influence on Tafuri is represented by the fact that in 1983, Tafuri will call his historical analysis of the Venetian Church of San Francesco dalla Vigna, a "microhistory": modelled, in other words, on that particular historiographical technique formulated by Ginzburg in 1976, in *The Cheese and the Worms*. This book is the historical account of the event of a miller tried and burned for heresy in the 16th century. Through his microhistory Ginzburg reconstructs the ideas, the religious and theological beliefs, and the mythologies of the era. And what else is Ginzburg's microhistory if not the Benjaminian "crystal of the total event" discovered in the "small discrete moment" in which "the entire course of history" is contained?⁷² And I am not only postulating the awareness of Ginzburg with Benjamin's notion of history and, even more specifically, with the *Theses*. Ginzburg closes the "Preface" of his book, in which he

⁷¹ Carlo Ginzburg and Adriano Prosperi, *Giochi di Pazienza: Un seminario sul "Beneficio di Cristo"*, Torino: Einaudi, 1975, p. 84; cited by M. Tafuri, "The Historical 'Project'", op. cit., p. 1.

⁷² Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, Torino: Einaudi, 1976.

exposes his historiographical methodology, with a quotation of Benjamin: "nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history", wrote Walter Benjamin. But 'only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past'. Redeemed, that is liberated.⁷³

Ginzburg poses, like Benjamin, the political problem of the "rest" of history. Like Brecht's worker, whom he mentions in the opening paragraph of *The Cheese and the Worms*, he asks himself: "who built Thebes of the seven doors?" Did the great men of history do all by themselves? What about the cooks, and the candle-stick makers?

Tafuri's aim is a history that, like Benjamin's, is counterhegemonic in two ways. In *how* it is written: as a montage of fragments to be recomposed as in a jig-saw puzzle. And in *whose* history it is: that of the "rest", of the "others". Which, in architectural terms, is translated by Tafuri in the "fragment" of the unfinished or unachieved work. "A failed work, an unrealized attempt, a fragment: do they not, perhaps, raise problems hidden by the completeness of works that have attained the status of 'texts'?"

But, in support of these principles, Tafuri does not cite Benjamin, but Michel Foucault. He will compose his history, he says, "with little, not obvious truths, arrived at with rigorous method": a quote of Foucault, who is citing Nietzsche.

Foucault: Debts and Critique

It is perhaps little wonder that Tafuri quotes Foucault: the latter has formulated the technique of "making the silences of history" speak in a

⁷³. Id., p. xxv.

brilliant and fascinating way. With these fragments of truth, Foucault has since shown us how to construct the fascinating history - or, rather, histories - of the Other.

Tafuri accepts Foucault's formulation on the existence of a plurality of histories and a plurality of origins, of beginnings of history. The search for an origin, Tafuri says, is the anachronistic remnant of a 19th century positivistic notion of history. "In posing the problem of an 'origin', we presuppose the discovery of a final point of arrival: a destination point that *explains* everything, and that, from its encounter with its originary ancestor, will cause a given 'truth', a primary value, to burst forth."⁷⁴ A circular notion of history, in other words, one that will arrive, after a series of events linked by a causal chain, at the predetermined end of its cycle, where all will be "explained". Foucault's history, instead, is not based on the consolatory recognition of universal structures of history, but on the differences, the breaks, the new forms, the "*facies*", that a specific, historic moment in time assumes.

This model of history, Tafuri adopts from Foucault. The notion of a non linear and non teleological history is already present in Benjamin's conception of history as a "constellation" of monads. From Foucault, however, Tafuri learns of the *épistème*: a, historical time-frame, whose boundaries with the preceding one are defined by a break, by a total change in the way people were able to "see", to "say" or to "think". Ways that are undoubtedly new and that do away with the old and reassuring methodology of the *deja' vu*: the liquidation of the new

⁷⁴. Tafuri, "The Historical 'Project'", op. cit., p. 3. [My tran. It. ed. p.6]

by finding correspondences for it, in the past. This would be the ultimate negation of history except for a notion of it that views it in a circular, eternally repetitive, way, proceeding in spiral circles along a larger one. In the realm of aesthetic criticism, such a circular notion of history, generates the search for immutable, universal forms. Recognizing the form of Tatlin's tower, in Borromini's lantern on the dome of the church of San Ivo alla Sapienza is a way to

exorcize the uneasiness provoked by the perception of 'epistemological breaks' by attempting to regain the innocence of archetypal symbols; the pyramid, the sphere, the circle, the ellipse, and the labyrinth will be installed as permanent structures of inexplicably changing forms in order for the archaeologist's anxiety to be placated by the recognition of an "eternal return of the same".⁷⁵

Against the "ideal significations and the indefinite teleologies" of a linear history Foucault, and Tafuri with him, opposes a "genealogy", a historical account of ruptures and discontinuity. An account that, above all, does not allow consolatory recognitions of immutable forms nor the self-recognition of the thinking subject. A history, in other words, that does away with "the temptation to rediscover a cozy, domestic hearth by resuscitating - through the most underhanded of means - the *I think of Kant*".⁷⁶

So, in opposition to *wirkliche Historie* [real or actual history], then, an analysis capable of reconstructing the event in its most singular and precise character and of restoring to the irruption of the event its disruptive character.

But this analysis primarily serves to "smash to bits those tendencies that have

⁷⁵. Id., p. 6.

⁷⁶. Ibidem.

encouraged the consoling play of recognitions." Recognition, in fact, presupposes what is already known: the unity of history - the subject to be "re-cognized" - is based on the unity of the structures on which it *rests*, on the unity, as well, of its single elements.⁷⁷

Against the linear construct of traditional history, appropriate to a unified, centralized subject, Tafuri opposes a genealogy that breaks up traditional historiographic stratifications and exposes instead a fragmentary plurality of histories, composed of "little truths". But in the breaking up of the flattened stratifications of history, in the dissemination of fragments of knowledge and in the taking apart of age-old traditional historical constructs, Tafuri sees an impending danger.

At the end, Tafuri contests to Foucault (and to Jacques Derrida) "the reconsecration of the fragments analysed under the microscope as new autonomous and intrinsically significant units."⁷⁸ For Tafuri, such a fragmentation impairs what is still the central postulate of his theory: that the task of historical analyses is a critique of reality. The fragments have to be recomposed in a system that alone, can have a line of march. "Every project - be it political, architectonic, economic, cultural, etc. - implies a line of march", multiple though this line may be.⁷⁹ The fragments, left disassembled, cannot have a direction and cannot constitute a project. The dismantling of the object to be analyzed, is a necessary phase of Tafuri's methodology and in this same essay he will render testimony to its usefulness as the instrument of a

⁷⁷. Id., p.4.

⁷⁸. Id., p.5.

⁷⁹. M. Tafuri, "Intervista a Fulvio Irace", op. cit., p. 27.

deconstructive critique in the specific field of architectural history. The danger in the Foucaultian and Derridean analyses lies rather in a "dissemination that is an end in itself". The breaking down and dissociation of long standing historical constructs and stratifications, in the hands of the "Lacanian Left", has become, for Tafuri, an "epistemology of pure registration".

As such, these analyses can have no political potential: "they can break up works and texts, construct fascinating genealogies, hypnotically illuminate historical knots glossed over by facile readings. But they must necessarily negate the existence of the *historic space*."⁸⁰

In order to analyse what this means, we have to trace our steps back to 1977, to a text called *Il Dispositivo Foucault* [The Foucault Mechanism] that is a collection of essays of some members of the Venice School: Massimo Cacciari, Franco Rella, Tafuri himself and Georges Teyssot.⁸¹

In his essay, "*Lettura del testo e pratiche discorsive*" [Text reading and discursive practices] Tafuri briefly outlines Foucault's notion of "discursive practice". A discursive practice is the "putting into language" of a thing that, only consequently to this operation, becomes a "discourse", i.e. a technique of domination. Until madness was not "sayable", because it was not "thinkable", a discourse on madness and, therefore, the practice of its domination, did not exist: madmen were free to roam the cities. Only when the discourse on madness was born, were asylums built in which to confine "madmen". Constructing a

⁸⁰. Tafuri, "The Historical 'Project'", op. cit., p.9.

⁸¹. Cacciari, F. Rella, M. Tafuri, G. Teyssot, *Il Dispositivo Foucault*, Venezia: Cluva, 1977.

language, a discourse for a "thing", enables the birth and the structuring of techniques of domination.

For Foucault, Tafuri goes on, all these different practices or techniques of domination, that is to say, the various "languages" that power speaks are not translatable one into the other. Power speaks multiple languages: each possesses its own code, impenetrable to the others. Thus for Foucault, Tafuri says, the simple identification of a discursive practice as such, is political activity. For Foucault, "there is no need to practice power, there is, instead a need to analyze, thus 'breaking', the powers as they apparently present themselves in the discursive, linguistic practice."⁸²

Power is fragmentary, dispersed, and exercised in multiple spaces of domination: the prison, the clinic, the psychiatric ward. There is no single, centralized locus of power, just as there is no centralized subject that exercises it. Power is at the same time inflicted and endured by the individuals in a society. The subjects are at the same time executors and victims of the strategies of domination, in which they are inevitably caught. The subject is crisscrossed by techniques of power, by strategies of domination of which he is not fully aware and that determine to a great extent his thoughts and actions. The distinction that marks who yields the power and who is controlled by it, is no longer identified as that between the traditionally dominant and dominated classes.

The recognition, and the breaking down, of these discursive practices, of these techniques of domination is, for Foucault, political

⁸². Id., p. 40.

tout court. He shatters the flat, smooth surface of the image constructed by traditional history and breaks it up into distinct techniques of domination, each with its own language and each with its own trajectory. For Tafuri, this is not enough.

For Tafuri, to simply name the specific loci and techniques of power is not sufficient. It is necessary to recognize the specific, historical intertwining of the plurality of these discourses. The fragments have to be assemblaged, they have to be made to "clash together". The limits between one discourse and the other, one language and the other, have to be interpenetrated. "This plural 'historical space', being 'space of the conflict', must make 'intersecate' the traces that remain [by using documents as] elements, even if not transparent ones, of a real power exercised on things and on the relations of production."⁸³ Instead of the dispersion, the "dissemination", of techniques of power, Tafuri intends to define the field in which the trajectories of these different techniques cut into each other, interact and come into conflict, in a specific context: the historical space, exactly.

Tafuri states this more than once: "if Power, like the institutions in which it incarnates itself, 'speaks many dialects,' then the object of historiography. must be the analysis of the 'collision' of these dialects." And again: "once a system of power is isolated, its genealogy cannot be offered as a universe complete in itself. The analysis must go further; it must make the previously isolated fragments collide with each other; it must dispute the limits it has set up."⁸⁴ The project is very explicitly political: "this 'dissemination' of the traces cannot give rise to any

⁸³. Id., p. 44.

⁸⁴. Tafuri, "The Historical 'Project'", op. cit., p.8 and p. ?

'reconstruction' and, above all, does not give rise to any 'space of clash', no longer gives rise to any 'space of conflict'"⁸⁵ And, in 1977, Tafuri asks:

Is there really space, in the current political moment, for this operation of infinite fragmentation of the various practices of power, that certainly digs inside the intersections and interstices - and here lies our interest in the practices of Nietzsche, of Derrida and of Foucault - but in order to become 'dissemination' to the wind, in a sort of game devoid of rules that can be verified in their social effects?⁸⁶

For Tafuri, the way to approach a critique of historical constructs (and, through it, a critique of reality) is not simply that of dismantling the constructs and leaving the pieces strewn on the ground. The "dissemination" does not allow a historical perspective, and that is to say, the awareness of the totality of interacting forces that guarantees the correct understanding of reality and, consequently, the effective intervention in it.

It is necessary to recompose the fragments obtained from the disassembly of the construct into an alternative construct. A negative critique is not sufficient, for Tafuri; he aims to provide a positive model. Because, "one fights a social production with alternative social productions; this seems to us indisputable."⁸⁷ Only this *different* construct can have a political line of march and can constitute a project, an alternative one. Admittedly, Tafuri says, all historical constructions - including, therefore, ours - are operations that suppress, negate and

⁸⁵. Tafuri, *Il Dispositivo ...*, op. cit., p.44.

⁸⁶. Id., p. 45.

⁸⁷. Tafuri, "The Historical 'Project'", op. cit., p. 11.

obliterate parts of history." As representation, history is also the fruit of a repression, of a negation. The problem is to make of that negation a determinate abstraction, to give a sense of direction to theoretical work."⁸⁸

A problem arises immediately one plans to reassemble the fragments into a montage. The problem is that posed by the fact that *all* historical constructs are precisely that: constructs. As such, they have two characteristics: they are composed by negative and positive spaces, or, in other words, by "repressions" and by "stones".

The repressions, the negations, the censures are those carried out by all historical analyses. In Tafuri's, and Benjamin's, montage the events chosen may differ from those selected from traditional historiography. But a selection nonetheless occurs: some parts of history are chosen, to the detriment of others. All the languages of criticism, "the genealogies of Foucault, our own criticism: are they not techniques that decipher only by hiding the traces of 'murders' committed more or less consciously?"⁸⁹

The "stones", instead, are the Nietzschean ones:

Wherever primitive mankind set up a word they believed that they had made a discovery [*Entdeckung*]. How different the truth is! They had touched upon a problem, and by supposing they had solved it, they had created an obstacle to its solution. Today, with every new bit of knowledge, one has to stumble over words that are petrified and hard as stones, and one will sooner break a leg than break a word.⁹⁰

⁸⁸. Id., p.10.

⁸⁹. Id., p. 9.

⁹⁰. Id., p. 7.

The stones are the "words" with which language is composed. Now, language is a technique of domination, but it is also a *necessary* one. It is a system within which we must necessarily operate. There is no standing point outside of it; it is the flexible but binding cage which confines us. Since language is a technique of domination, Tafuri says, Nietzsche's words could be applied to other techniques of domination; in other words, to the plurality of techniques of domination that constitute the edifice of the superstructure, ideology.

Ideology, just like language, ideology is the enabling system within which we have to operate; there is no escape from it. Thus for Tafuri, the "stones" are the "words" of the language we have to speak (or, rather, are "spoken by") or the building blocks of the edifice of ideology.

We must be aware of the danger of allowing our constructions to be built of "stones" just as hard to remove. In that case, our constructions too, would unwillingly become part of the larger "castle" of ideology. "Even the language of criticism, the language that should 'move and break up stones,' is itself a 'stone.' How are we to utilize it, then, to prevent it from becoming the instrument of a sacred rite?" The solution, for Tafuri, resides in the interminable *labor* of criticism: "historical genealogy presents itself with all the characteristics of a *labor*: a deconstructive and reconstructive labor, a labor that displaces the Nietzschean 'stones' and reassembles them, which *produces* meanings by removing those already given."⁹¹

The validity of our criticism, then, resides in its productivity, in the infiniteness of analysis, in the awareness of the provisory character of

⁹¹. Id., p. 12

its constructions, that criticism must take apart as soon as they are completed, in order for the "stones" to be reassembled in a different way. Historical writing "incorporates uncertainty: 'true history' is not that which cloaks itself in indisputable 'philological proofs', but that which recognizes its own arbitrariness, which recognizes itself as an 'unsafe building.'"⁹² No sooner has a montage been assembled that it has to be critiqued and taken apart, but precisely "here lies the 'fertile uncertainty' of the analysis itself, its interminableness, its need to return constantly to the material examined, *and, at the same time, to itself.*"⁹³ (My italics)

In the last part of the sentence lies the key of the solution to the question that Tafuri has been examining:, that is to say. how to produce a construct that is a critique of reality and that does not become an instrumental part of it.

The construction, the montage of history that Tafuri proposes is "alternative" in its very structure. Like in the avant-garde work, it is the form of Tafuri's historical account that constitutes a critique of reality. Critiqueing the construct that one has erected, then, amounts to a critique of reality. "The real problem is how to project a criticism capable of constantly putting itself into crisis by putting into crisis the real. The real, mind you, and not merely its individual sections."⁹⁴ This idea is clearly expressed in a fundamental passage:

History, exactly like Freudian analysis at its core, is not merely a therapy. By questioning its own materials, it reconstructs them and continuously reconstructs

⁹². Ibidem. The Italian word for "unsafe" ("insicuro"), suggests both the sense that a building is "unsafe" because it is about to collapse, and that it is 'insecure' about its foundations.

⁹³. Id., p.11.

⁹⁴. Id., p. 9.

itself. The genealogies it traces are therefore also temporary barriers, just as analytic work is anything but shielded from the conditionings of signifying practices or modes of production. The historian is a worker "in the plural," as are the subjects on which he performs his work. In history, then, the problem of language exists. Inasmuch as it is a criticism of signifying practices, it will have to "shift the stones" by shifting around its own stones. Criticism speaks only if the doubt with which it attacks the real turns back on itself as well.⁹⁵

Tafuri is fully aware of the fact that our own deconstructions too, are "attempts to change the rules of the game [that] enjoy no autonomy."⁹⁶ That we too, are enmeshed in systems of power, in practices of domination, in the sphere of ideology, only from inside of which, we can operate. It is only from within language that we can speak. Thus, one needs to take cognizance of the fact that also "genealogies" are "temporary barriers", not in the least immune from "the conditionings of signifying practices or modes of production."

We can at this point more fully comprehend Tafuri's critique of Foucault: "plurality" and "fragmentation" must definitely become fundamental notions of a theory of historiography. But left as such, the fragments cannot perform their task, that is to say, a critique of reality. In fact, "what will allow me to pass from a history written in the plural to a questioning of that very plurality?"⁹⁷ In other words, if we do not recompose the fragments in the figure of the "historical space", we will not be able to question that very construct. We will not be able to avoid

⁹⁵. Id., p. 12.

⁹⁶. Id., p. 13.

⁹⁷. Id., p. 5.

its becoming another stone in the edifice of ideology; instead of breaking and removing stones, we will have piled up more.

Joan Ockman has spoken of the "labors of Sisyphus", for such a conception of history, one: "interminably pushing fragments of provisory knowledge uphill in order to prepare them to roll back down again".⁹⁸ Ockman's remarks appear to consider Tafuri's provisory constructs as deriving from a "Post Structuralist" notion of the unattainability of knowledge, except in the form of dispersed fragments of truth. One cannot agree with her, however, inasmuch as she poses the question if, starting from this notion of criticism, Tafuri is "capable of envisioning, and allowing, any future that is different from the present?" Nor can one agree with her when she states that one of the questions posed by Tafuri's theory is whether "the historian can have any ultimate effectiveness beyond small increases in his own consciousness of his burden".⁹⁹ Tafuri's historiography contains undoubtedly more than an "incrementalist notion" that pushes his project "back from the brink of pure nihilism."¹⁰⁰ Tafuri's theory could not be more explicitly, more rigorously, and more lucidly, directed towards the constitution of a political project than this.

The dinamicity involved in Tafuri's notion of criticism, the positing of provisory barriers only to dismantle them again, is not counterhegemonic only in an epistemological sense, but is rather an integral part of the strategy he uses to avoid, as much as possible, being

⁹⁸. Joan Ockman, "Postscript: Critical History and the Labors of Sisyphus", in *Architecture, Criticism, Ideology*, Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1985. p. 188.

⁹⁹. Ibidem.

¹⁰⁰. Id., p. 186.

entrapped in the net of ideology. A moving target is more difficult to shoot.

After the ample detour, after the thorough exploration of French Post Structuralism's methodological instruments and aims, and after accepting the former while rejecting the latter, Tafuri returns to Benjamin. In common, they have a revolutionary agenda, and the project of constructing a montage of history.

"The first step of the way will be to apply the principle of montage to history"

In the last part of the essay, Tafuri deals with the specific field of architectural history and criticism. I have mentioned already that, for Tafuri, an unfinished work, a *projet manqué*, can shed light on questions that would be hidden by the "pacified" image of monuments, in which creative tensions and utopian visions have attained an equilibrium. The work of architecture, in fact, is always the product of unresolved conflicts between its various (social, economic, intellectual, ideological) components. It is precisely these conflicting forces, that the historian must recognize, in the work of architecture. The task of the historian is to identify and emphasize "the dialectic that in time comes to establish itself between *concrete labor* and *abstract labor*, in the Marxian meaning of both terms."¹⁰¹ In other words, between intellectual ("concrete") labor and the modes and relations of production ("abstract labor").

¹⁰¹. Tafuri, "The Historical 'Project'", op. cit., p. 14.

Architectural history thus assumes diverse tasks. On the one hand, it must be made capable of critically describing the processes that condition the "concrete" side of the creation of projects, that is to say, the autonomy of linguistic choices and their historical function as a specific chapter in the history of intellectual labor and its mode of reception. On the other hand, it must be fitted into the general history of the structures and relations of production; it must be made, in other words, to "react" with respect to the development of *abstract labor*.¹⁰²

This idea is different from the one expressed in *Theories and History*, according to which the work of architecture has to be read as an ideological representation that stems from the socio-economic context, in which it was generated. In "The Historical 'Project'", "to displace the investigation from a text (a work that offers itself up in all its character of apparent completeness) to a context is not sufficient." Because it is true that the context "binds together artistic languages, physical realities, behaviors, urban and territorial dimensions, politico-economic dynamics." But it is also true that it is constantly broken up "by subterranean ideologies that nevertheless act on an intersubjective level; it is broken up by the interaction of diverse techniques of domination, each of which possess its own untranslatable language."¹⁰³ In the later essay, the work of architecture is considered as a product of the mutual, conflicting interaction of modes of production and intellectual stances, of socio-economic forces and creative drives.

¹⁰². Ibidem.

¹⁰³. Id., p. 5.

The identification, by the historian, of the interweaving of intellectual modes and modes of production, will break down the synthesis that the work "displays". Whenever the synthesis of the work of architecture "is presented as a completed whole", it will be necessary to intervene and make it "explode" in order to "introduce a disintegration, a fragmentation, a "dissemination" of its constitutive units."¹⁰⁴ The fragments thus obtained will belong to both the "concrete" and the "abstract" sphere of labor: "client reactions, symbolic horizons, avant-garde hypotheses, linguistic structures, methods of reorganizing production, technological inventions".¹⁰⁵ For each component of the work the historian will have to write a history. Each history will require specific instruments, methods, materials, in order to be written. For each part, a different technique and a different approach will be necessary: "iconology, the history of political economics, the history of thought, of religions, of the sciences, of popular traditions will each be able to appropriate fragments of the broken-up work."¹⁰⁶

But none of these fragments, none of the dismembered parts of the work, can render the sense of the *totality* of the work. The fragments will have to be recomposed: "the critical act will consist of a recomposition of the fragments once they are historicized: in their 'remontage'".¹⁰⁷ It is not a question of writing a plurality of histories, one for each component of the work, it is rather a question of historicizing each component. Reading it, in other words, in its specific

¹⁰⁴. Id., p. 14.

¹⁰⁵. Ibidem.

¹⁰⁶. Id., p. 15.

¹⁰⁷. Ibidem.

interaction with the other components of a definite, social, economic, historical, time frame. The parts have to be reassembled at the cost of making them clash together. Which in any case would only mean recognizing their true nature: "the construction of a physical space is certainly the site of a 'battle'".¹⁰⁸ The conflict of the different aims and aspirations of the various components is what produced the work in the first place. The historian's task is, unmistakably, to break up and identify the plurality of interacting forces that have given rise to the form of the work of architecture.

Tafuri has in mind, rather than the Foucaultian *épistème*, the Benjaminian "monad", as a model. While the latter is a tridimensional coagulum of conflicting drives and tensions, the latter is, for all its fascination, dimensionless. The plurality of its genealogies, of its discursive practices, of its techniques of domination, never cross and cut into each other, never clash or interact but lie, instead, flat on the plane of history.

To continue with the phases of Tafuri's methodology in the analysis of an architectural object: the breaking up of the work produces, as we have seen, fragments that do not belong to the sphere of intellectual production alone. Fragments that are part of, Tafuri uses a term he borrows from the Russian Formalists, the "extralinguistic" series. That do not, in other words, belong to the language of architecture but, rather, to spheres external to it: the particular structure of the relations of production, in which the work was produced. It is against these "extralinguistic" series, these factors that are apparently

¹⁰⁸. Id., p. 8.

external to the work of architecture, that the language of architecture has to be made to "react", in the chemical sense, has to be put to the test. Recomposing the work means placing side by side the two (linguistic and "extralinguistic") series, in order to set off the language of the work of architecture against the structure of the relations of production in which it was generated. This will break "the magic circle of language, obliging it to reveal the foundations on which it rests" and will enable us to understand the way language "functioned" in this external sphere. Tafuri's aim is to "measure the real incidence of language on the extralinguistic series to which it is connected".¹⁰⁹ Which quite specifically means that, Tafuri says,

I would have to measure just how the introduction of a measurable conception of figurative space is a reaction to the crisis of the Renaissance bourgeoisie; how the disintegration of the concept of form corresponds to the formation of the new metropolitan universe; how the ideology of an architecture reduced to an "indifferent object", to mere typology, to a reorganization project of the building trades, fits into the real perspective of an "alternative" urban administration.¹¹⁰

Language, including architectural language, in fact, is a technique of domination, it is the wall of "stones" that have to be removed, it is the edifice of ideology, the concept of which is no longer the same as in Tafuri's earlier writings. In fact, "to define ideology tout court as the expression of a false intellectual consciousness would be totally useless."¹¹¹ But the central postulate of Tafuri's theory is still that of

¹⁰⁹. Id., p. 15.

¹¹⁰. Ibidem.

¹¹¹. Id., p. 16.

the "historical role of ideology". The need to not allow it to act undisturbed and to, undisturbed, proliferate, is still pressing. Comparing architectural language, or that is to say, a more complex notion of ideology and its transformations, against social reality, will help us understand what the extent, and nature, of ideology's interventions in reality have been, how they have functioned, and how they still do.

Reinserting architectural history in the sphere of "a history of the social division of labor" would not mean erasing the specific characteristics of architecture. On the contrary, these characteristics would be emphasized "through a reading that would determine, on the basis of verifiable parameters, the real significance of planning choices within the dynamics of the productive transformations that they set into motion, that they slow up, that they try to impede."¹¹² For the first time in the essay, Tafuri cites Benjamin. The technique that has just been exposed, he says, is at least a partial to answer the questions posed by Benjamin in "The Author as Producer". The question concerning the fact that what the work says of the relations of production is of secondary importance with respect to the function of the work itself within those relations.¹¹³

The alternative to this methodology, Tafuri argues, would be the one adopted by Barthes and the *Nouvelle Critique*. Following their example, we would endeavour to "multiply the metaphores within the architectural text"; And this would mean choosing to:

¹¹². Id., p. 15.

¹¹³. Id., p. 16.

descend into the magic circle of language, transforming it into a bottomless well. The so-called operative criticism has been doing this for some time, serving, like fast food, its arbitrary and pyrotechnical set-ups of Michelangelo, Borromini and Wright. Yet, if I choose to do this, I must realize clearly that my aim is not to forge history, but rather to give form to a neutral space, in which to float, above and beyond time, a mass of weightless metaphors. I will ask of this space nothing but to keep me fascinated and pleasantly deceived.¹¹⁴

And, so that it may be clear once and for all, Tafuri repeats it: "both approaches are legitimate". There is no truth that one wants to claim absolute validity for. "It is only a question of the ends one proposes."¹¹⁵ There is no denial or camouflaging of the fact that one has a project; and that one's history, in this sense, is definitely an operative one.

¹¹⁴. Id., p. 15.

¹¹⁵. Ibidem.

CHAPTER THREE

Conclusion

Some issues arise from the material that has been considered thus far and need to be briefly examined.

Tafuri identifies architecture with ideology, and thus states that the task of historical criticism is to rupture the mystifying layer of ideology. But there are some problems inherent in the very notion of ideology, of which Tafuri himself is aware. The first of these problems is of an epistemological nature. In fact, if one postulates the existence of ideology as "false consciousness", as a distortion of reality, one is also postulating, by the very same act, the existence of "true consciousness": a non-distorted model of reality.

As Llorens points out, Tafuri is caught in the "central epistemological problem for any Marxist theory of ideology", which is "how to conceive of such 'distortion' without falling into the inconsistency of postulating an ideal, 'non-distorted' model of reality (which would not be socially determined)".¹¹⁶ This ideal model of

¹¹⁶. Llorens, op. cit., p. 90.

reality cannot "really" exist inasmuch as it is not determined by social reality (which determines 'appearances', instead).

There are, in other words, "moral" implications in Tafuri's theory of architecture as ideology which he "fails to see" but "cannot avoid being unwillingly affected by it". Thus, Llorens continues, "since the 'moral denunciation' brandished by the intellectual cannot penetrate the indissoluble, necessary (and amoral) bonds that link ideology with social structure, it hits him back and results in a guilt complex." The main motivation of this complex, he argues, is "Tafuri's own attitude towards his object of study in as much as the study itself *'cannot pretend to have any 'revolutionary aim''*".¹¹⁷ It is necessary to note that Llorens is referring only to Tafuri's writings up to *Architecture and Utopia*, Certainly by the time he writes "The Historical 'Project'", Tafuri has taken cognizance of the "amoral" links of ideology to society, as I hope to have made clear. In what Llorens considers an inescapable logical fallacy of Tafuri's thought, one could instead see the very notion that allows the architectural historian to supersede infantile prejudices. In fact, once one *has* come to the conclusion that everything is ideology, it would not make much sense to speak of it in terms of "good" or "bad". This would allow the Marxist historian to make a placid critique of Albert Speer's architecture, for instance, which many non-Marxist critics are still wary of doing. What I am trying to point out is the fact that an architectural history based on a critique of ideology does not always result in the expression of naive judgments that liquidate a work simply because it was produced in a

¹¹⁷. Id., p. 91.

politically "incorrect" regime. Such logic would would mean, for instance, that

the constructivist volumes of the Kennedy era - and we are referring to a Kallman, or to a Kevin Roche - should equally be regarded as symbols of American democracy and of its "civil" colonization of Vietnam. Only giving up the use of such infantile parallelisms is it possible to write history.¹¹⁸

Another delicate issue is that of the operativity of history. Tafuri's is an operative history too, his critique of "Operative Criticism" notwithstanding. But there is no victory in this discovery; he had admitted it himself very clearly as early as 1968: the distortion of historical analyses is to be rejected, he says, "not because the instrumentalisation of history is *wrong*, but because the ends we propose are different".¹¹⁹ And again in 1980: "It would be useless to tear into the methods of 'operative criticism' (but it would be more correct to call it 'normative,' to avoid the ever-possible misunderstandings as to our true intentions)".¹²⁰ What he rejects is the normativity of history, its supposed ability to tell us how to design, not its operativity, its utilization for political ends.

Precisely because it is *not* prescriptive, history cannot be politically operative in the sense that it would teach us how to *make* revolution. Historical analyses "*cannot pretend to have any 'revolutionary' aim*". The goal of Tafuri is that of constructing a history that is intrinsically, that is of itself, revolutionary. Since the time of the avant-

¹¹⁸. Id. p. 333.

¹¹⁹. Tafuri, *Theories*,op. cit., p.233.

¹²⁰. Tafuri, "The Historical Project", op. cit., p. 11.

garde, one can no longer believe in writing a work (or a history) that is politically committed by virtue of its content, i.e. of what it "says". From Benjamin, Tafuri has learned that it is not the *content* of the work of art that can be political, but its *form*, its very structure. That the political message must not be sought in *what* the work of art says, of the relations of production, but in *how* it posits itself within those relations. In other words, it is the relationship between the techniques by which the work is assembled and the techniques of production, that must be acknowledged. The crucial focus of the analysis of a work must be on its techniques of montage. Only along this line of thought, can the work (aesthetic production) and its "reader" (aesthetic criticism), engage in a critique of reality.

Tafuri has the same advantage over traditional historiography, or over operative criticism, that Benjamin has, in that they have both renounced all positivistic claims to the "objectivity" of history. They are aware of the illusory nature of the pursuit of *the* truth; or of reconstructing the past "as it really was". Tafuri admits it explicitly: "[we] face once again the question of genealogy, just as Nietzsche proposed it - as a 'construction' in the true sense of the word, an instrument (modifiable, therefore, and to be consumed) in the hands of the historian." 121

Admittedly, Tafuri's history is a montage of fragments that have been selected over others, and thus cannot claim greater validity over other constructs. But I think that what applies to Benjamin also applies to Tafuri: ultimately, they have faith in the fact that their history is

121. Id., p. 8.

"truer" because it rights injustices that have been perpetrated for centuries against the oppressed of history. There is still the pressing need for a demystifying operation of the critic and, at the bottom, the need for the attainment of a "truth", although it is not a transcendental, idealist notion of it. Rather than absolute validity, this idea of truth represents what, in a specific socio-historical situation, would be "right". In a much more clear-cut way than in Benjamin, it is not a theological redemption of the meek that Tafuri is talking about. His aim is the very materialist one to write a history that would be *"capable of calling into question at every instant the historic legitimacy of the capitalistic division of labor."*¹²²

Throughout his writings, Tafuri does not abandon the central assumption around which his theory revolves: the notion that historical analyses' task is the critique of ideology. In "The Historical 'Project'" he criticizes his own conception of this critique: it only attacked, he says, ideology's most apparent, most superficial aspects. Ideology's pervasiveness is all-encompassing; Althusser's lesson has been fully understood: ideology is what constitutes the ruling, but also the teaching system, the Church, State institutions, ideological and repressive state apparatuses in which we are inevitably trapped and caught from the minute we are born. In ideology, and its systems, we are completely enmeshed and only from within this system can we operate: there is no Achillean fulcrum "without". "While speaking in ideology, and from within ideology we have to outline a discourse

¹²². Id., p. 16.

which tries to break with ideology, in order to dare to be the beginning of a scientific (i.e. subjectless) discourse on ideology."¹²³

Once again Tafuri quotes Foucault: "on this we can still agree with Foucault: a single locus of Great Refusal does not exist; it is from within the systems of power that we know ourselves."¹²⁴ We are crisscrossed by the plurality of the systems of power and domination. We are at the same time victims and oppressors, *subjects*, in both senses of the word, of the strategies of control, of mystification, of domination.

In "The Historical 'Project'" the problem of the centrality of the subject is explicitly addressed: the bourgeois notion of a self-sufficient, autonomous subject that is fully in control of his thoughts and actions and endowed with willpower (will to know and know "for a fact", objectively) is, for Tafuri, completely obsolete. One can no longer believe in the separate existence of two complementary worlds: the full and integral consciousness of an autonomous and central subject, around which the equally autonomous world of objective facts revolves.

Tafuri, as I have said, never abandons his project of a critique of ideology: he simply changes his strategy. The critique no longer assumes the aspect of a frontal clash between two impenetrable blocks, i.e. demystifying critique versus ideology. He no longer harbors such a

¹²³. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological state Apparatuses" in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, NLB, 1971., p. 173. In this, which is perhaps his most famous essay, and which was first published in France in 1970, the Marxist theoretician exposes his ideas on the pervasiveness and inescapability of ideology. Tafuri, given his proven attention to all that was going on beyond the Alps, was certainly familiar with the article and its author, but never cites him.

¹²⁴. Tafuri, "The Historical 'Project'", op. cit., p. 5.

monolithical conception of reality and ideology. Tafuri realizes that the struggle must be carried on by inserting one's analyses between the numerous crevices and interstices of the edifice of ideology and by exerting power, in order to wedge them apart.

The construction of physical space is certainly the site of a "battle" ... That such a battle is not totalizing, that it leaves borders, remains, residues, is also an indisputable fact. And thus a vast field of investigation is opened up - an investigation on the limits of languages, of the boundaries of techniques, of the thresholds that "provide density."¹²⁵

It is with these "borders", these "residues", with the leftover fragments that Tafuri wants to construct his alternative history. The aim, and the means to achieve it, are as clearly, and as explicitly, stated in Tafuri as they are in Benjamin.

To conclude, a few notes on the epistemological implications of Tafuri's theory. According to Ockman, the idea that knowledge is made up of fragments of truth is an attitude that "evidently is symptomatic of our time." Both she and Dennis Doordan, in his article on "Architecture and Politics" in Italy, quote a passage of Aldo Rossi from his *Scientific Autobiography*: "to what, then, could I have aspired in my craft? Certainly to small things, having seen that the possibility of great ones was historically precluded."¹²⁶ Doordan, however, rather than attributing these attitudes to a sort of *Zeitgeist*, a "Spirit of the Time", sees in it the very concrete result of the political situation in Italy. According to Doordan, by the mid 1970s it was "painfully clear" to

¹²⁵. Id., p. 8.

¹²⁶. Aldo Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography*, Cambridge, Mass: M.I.T. Press, 1981, p. 23. Cited by Doordan^{198...} : 67 and Ockman^{....}:185.

everyone that the revolutionary promise of student and labor activism in the late 1960s and early 1970s had foundered. In 1978, the kidnapping and execution of Aldo Moro, the Christian Democrat politician, by the Red Brigades, a Leftist extremist group, destroyed all hopes for an "alternative" government with the Communist Party. This was only the culmination of a situation that had begun in the years following the Second World War. Architects and urban planners were able to exercise very little control over the political and economic development of the built environment during the reconstruction, in the immediate postwar years, or during the miracle years of the 1960s and 1970s. It is against this background of growing professional frustrations and disillusionment that, according to Doordan, one must read the critics' and intellectuals' disillusionment about the capability of architecture to be an effective agent of political and social change. The loss of faith in large scale utopian plans is, according to him, the explanation behind Rossi's quote.

In the case of Italy, and of the particular links that existed between the intellectuals and the Communist Party, this is certainly an accurate assessment of the situation. However, I think that one should not fail to see, in the notion of the possibility of attaining only "little truths", a sign of our times, undoubtedly, but an epistemological one. The notion represents an epistemological threshold that has been crossed without return. Tafuri is fully aware of this and, as we have seen, his methodology is profoundly affected by it. But, unlike the set of ideas that, for brevity's sake, one lumps together under the heading "Post Structuralism" or "Deconstruction", Tafuri retains the fundamental Marxist idea of a project of social praxis. He adopts the notion of the

fragmentation and "dissemination" of knowledge not for its own sake, but as a methodological instrument in the formulation of his historical, and that is to say social and political, project. A Marxist historiographic critique cannot put aside the question of "truth" which, in the social sphere, is displaced by the question of "right" or "wrong". This, implies expressing a value judgment, however much the Frenchs' hair may stand on end at the very sound of the word. Most critics, in fact, would interpret the expression in a universal atemporal sense and thus immediately refer it to an anachronistic , and idealist, stance. But a value judgment does not imply a claim to the absolute validity of a position. It is a judgment expressed on a specific socio-historical framework and it is the only possible point of departure of a Marxist critique of reality. Of a critique, in other words, that establishes its intention to change reality as the fundamental premise of its theory. The renunciation of a positivistic notion of "objectivity" does not imply the abandonment of the quest for "truth". Tafuri renounces the first but not, ultimately, the second. The endless "proliferation of metaphors" that float above the surface of a work never achieve to affect the reality to which the work belongs. Still, "both approaches are legitimate: it is only a question of the ends that one proposes."

We can recognize, in Tafuri's positions, an outline of an Italian reception and critique of French Post Structuralism. A critique that is based on the realization that these theories have exhausted the task, albeit a very important one, that they had: to subvert, and clear away the remnants of, positivist and idealist ideas that had lasted too long. This task has been accomplished but these theories have also, reached the limit beyond which they cannot bear fruit. Thus, the Italian

critique, which can be schematically outlined as centered around the following issues: first, a work is undoubtedly an "open" one. and it requires the active cooperation of its reader to interpret it. Consequently, there is more than one possible interpretation of a work. This is certainly true but, although the interpretations are more than one, it is equally true that they are not infinite. That there is, in other words, a limit to the number of possible, reasonable or fruitful readings of a work. This is the core of the argument, extremely lucidly expressed,, of Umberto Eco's last book, *The Limits of Interpretation*. Second, the "minor historiography", the history of the "Other" has been a fundamental historiographical conquest that cannot be over emphasized. However, Ginzburg vehemently criticizes Foucault's work on Pierre Rivière, the historical account of a man tried for the murder of his whole family, in the early nineteenth century. In Foucault's microhistory, Ginzburg says, the author of the murders, the Other, is described as "a man without culture...an animal without instinct... a mythical being, a monster whom it is impossible to define because he is outside any recognizable order." With the result, Ginzburg argues, that one is "dazzled by an absolute extraneousness that, in reality, results from the refusal to analyze and interpret."¹²⁷ The attack of Ginzburg is directed to the supposed ineffability or "absolute extraneousness" of the Other. This, in fact, renders futile the recognition of the necessity for a history the oppressed, the obliterated. In Tafuri's words, the deconstruction of traditional historiography, and the proposal of an alternative construct must not mean recurring to

¹²⁷. Ginzburg, op. cit., p. xviii.

"the ineffable supremacy of the anonymously produced word".¹²⁸
Both historian's attack is directed to the French's refusal to recompose the "fragments" into a comprehensible figure and, parallelly, to their nihilistic attitude towards praxis, towards a project of social change.

Perhaps, the theories that we refer to as French Post Structuralism are nearing the end of their cycle, and we are about to witness the birth of a new one.

¹²⁸. Tafuri, "The Historical Project", op. cit., 18

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