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Truth or Consequence

Notes on Architecture and Digital Image

"I always lie"

(Philosophic paradox)

1. "TRUTH"

The aesthetization of architecture, either spontaneous or developed during the mediation processes, does not always entail a loss of meaning while standing before the original "truth", as Neil Leach seems to argue in his *The Anaesthetics of Architecture*. In fact, aesthetization might be fruitful in a way that might be compatible with its origin, affirming the complexity of the distance between the conceptions of the architectural object and its materialization, and its following reception.

We may and we should recognize that images of architecture (especially photography) are, since their beginning (given its bidimensional condition), something else other than architecture, and yet this condition will potentiate an aestheticization, which is able to influence our appropriation of the object. The images frequently mediate our relationship with the building, creating improbable affections that arise from a direct relationship with the object. And, even more frequently, the circulation of images, its ability to reach where objects do not reach, will increase the risk and the convenience of making them replaceable by the object, often without the existence of any comparative possibility that would enable us to see its "truth" – a simplistic illusion that Neil Leach does not seem to forgo with respect to the debate on ethics over aesthetics.

But, if images distance themselves physically and metaphorically from the immobility of buildings (a distance that seems to be in proportion with the level of "dishonesty"), the "truth" of objects, coming from a *in situ* direct experience, will hardly guarantee one sense only; that is to say, a sense bounded to its origin and conception, corresponding to a single reality, a single way to see. The building would have to be preserved in formalin to prevent time, use or context, from transforming its perception. And even if this would be possible to simulate (assuring a least common denominator that would bring up a converging sense, from which history, style and false objectivity spring up), the whole reality will always be subject to individual interpretation – which will always be a better translator of the "truth" of things; a subjective truth, yet legitimate, because, as Jean Luc-Godard declared: "The world begins and ends in me"¹.

¹ Reference to the movie "2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle" (1967).

2. "CONSEQUENCE"

Anything is possible in the Photoshop universe; image does not attain to a truth, an origin and not even an authorship, which will lead to a reconsideration of the truth of things. In his book *The Reconfigured Eye*², William J. Mitchell develops several theories about the new tools for the production of digital images that will allow us to speculate about the consequences within the field of architecture.

Before moving further, it is worth noting that Mitchell presents digital software (such as Photoshop) as being closer to "painting" (creation of an image from a drawing of a non existing reality) than to "photography" (creation of an image from a capture, from an existing reality); maybe it is not by chance that the opening image of the Photoshop program is an image that seems to have been hand-drawn³. But it is within the field of digital image that "drawing" and "capture" combine, enabling the new realities of the "electrobricolage"⁴ era. The consequences of this fabrication have been long discussed, especially as far as "truth" indexes are concerned, which in the media take on the form of deontological issues. The Wall Street Journal estimates that 10% of the color images published in the United States have been altered or manipulated⁵, something that led the art critic Andy Grundberg to assume that "in the future, newspapers and magazines' readers will probably look to the images next to the news as illustrations and not as reports, and this shall happen because they will have an account the fact that they know they are not able to distinguish a genuine image from one that has been digitally manipulated.

2 William J. Mitchell: *The Reconfigured Eye*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1992.

3 It is the image of an idyllic landscape with a sailboat in the horizon and an eye behind a loupe. The artist Alexandre Estrela has developed this theme in a work in which he redesigns this same image, drawn by hand in graphite: "the fact that the logo of the Photoshop program is a drawing instead of something more photographic or digital is quite intriguing. The drawing is an undeniable authorial identity and by being presented like that, Photoshop sells the illusion that it is an intimate and subjective program, distant from its industrial use." (Alexandre Estrela: Catalogue of the Exhibition *Merda*. Guimarães: Centro Cultural Vila Flor, 2006).

4 William J. Mitchell: *The Reconfigured Eye*, p. 7.

5 Idem, p. 16.

Even if photographers and publishers do resist manipulating the images – something quite likely to happen – their credibility will decrease given the low expectation level⁶.

Maybe the most meaningful aspect in this scenario is the confirmation that readers have lost their innocence, after being confronted with the impossibility of distinguishing between "truth" and "lie", and they will not give credit to the traditional deontological rigor. In any case, even the images seen as "documents" are seen as quite controversial – the image may be instrumentally rigorous but its content can be misinterpreted⁷.

This does not mean that one should despise the truth enclosed in the photo, but the reader's intelligence and ability to question must be acknowledged, as well as their legitimate tendency to seek their own perception of reality in the images, and aestheticization is a crucial element in this matter⁸.

William J. Mitchell (as does Baudrillard) believes that the digital image led to the construction of a self-referenced reality: "images no longer directly reflect the world, as they seemed to have done, they reflect features (perhaps distorted) of other images. This loss of outer reference, along with the increase of symbolic system' self-reference – for so long was a matter of deep concern to post-structuralism – are now brought to a new level. Logical associations of images in data bases and computer networks have become more crucial to the construction of reality than the physical relation of objects in space. The digital image now constructs issues

6 Andy Grundberg: "Ask It no Questions: The Camera Can Lie", *The New York Times*, 12-08-1990 (quoted by Mitchell: *The Reconfigured Eye*, p. 17).

7 We recall "Pieta de Argel", considered the "photo of the year" by World Press Photo, in 1997, which illustrated the Bentilha massacre.

8 If we look at the images in reference newspapers, we can easily observe that it is not enough to document reality in an objective and raw manner. One can observe that the selection of images also obeys to aesthetic criteria. Isn't that what has distinguished photographers such as Robert Capa?

in cyberspace"⁹. The idea that, nowadays, it exists a new "virtual reality" autonomous from a "physical reality" is reinforced by the digital images' own characteristics: the digital image has no "origin", it can be created without a capture, it has no provenience, it does not leave a record or possess a physical support like photography that had a negative, it does not exist an "original". On the other hand, it enables and stimulates the association of disperse fragments, the manipulation of existing desires, reinventing reality with no boundaries. It is a wish coming true.

Although W.J. Mitchell does not arrive to the same conclusions as Baudrillard, which one would think as "ideological", he will surely oppose and call attention to the separation between physical reality and virtual reality, evidencing the supremacy of the latter, given that is considered as being in the same level of the act of structuring thought. Mitchell will also claim that digital image, besides not having an "origin", it has no end, that is to say: it is a permanent moldable support that stimulates an idea of appropriation and deviance. It also has no "end" — it is not a "finished piece of work" — and given the facility of its circulation, it offers an endless array of senses proportional to the diversity of contexts it goes through. And if, on the one hand, one can recognize that the digital image also faces the loss of authorship (the author does not control the meaning of his work or its circulation or destiny). On the other hand, it acquires new readings, highlighting the role of the observers, which will manipulate the meaning according to their specific interests or to their particular context.

Apart from each other, these issues are not entirely new (History of Art has spent the 20th century stumbling over these issues) but, as a whole, these attributes of digital image ("an open structure, without origin nor original, self-referenced, with no authorship") should imply a critical reconfiguration of reality's representation and reception, even more so within the field of architecture, so vulnerable to the new instruments and techniques of digital representation.

9 Mitchell: *The Reconfigured Eye*, p. 52.

In our perspective, the introduction of digital representation in architecture instigated an extreme debate between "real" and "virtual", as if they were two absolutely autonomous and antagonistic worlds. Nowadays, this question seems to have been overcome, not because there is a precise answer in respect to the definition of boundaries, but because the existence of a hybrid, cloudy landscape has been acknowledged: "the solution to some problems relies in the knowledge that they don't have a solution". Thus, we must agree with A.D. Rodrigues when he states that: "we had lost the illusion of the immediate apprehension of reality a long time ago; we didn't need to wait for the invention of information technologies. The discovery of the signifier's autonomy in relation to its meanings and designated objects precedes the invention of writing and it is the origin of the wake of the rational reflection that our civilization has continued ever since. The one thing that current devices of information questions are the relationships between simulacra and reality, when they elaborate projects that, though inexistent in the natural world, are apprehended by our senses in a manner that is more real than natural."¹⁰.

In search of an understatement of reality, A.D. Rodrigues reminds us that, when speaking about information or digital representation, we speak most of the times through the perspective of the production or the programmer, but we rarely focus on the point of view of the user, whose recognition of shapes will always take place in the analogue way, "since it presupposes the perception of a sense, through the insertion of the shapes apprehended or perceived in a frame or background that makes them intelligible or identifiable"¹¹, and this sense always depends on a given cultural experience. In this perspective, the contrast between virtual and real gets highly diffuse, and the judgments peg towards the end and not the means.

¹⁰ Rodrigues: "Contributos para uma Genealogia do Virtual", *Revista de Comunicação e Linguagem* #25-26, p. 90.

¹¹ Idem, p. 92.

Nevertheless, and within our specific cultural frame (and architectural culture), a technical dazzle persists and seems to prevail over any other speech, either be it an aesthetic (as Siza¹² regretted) or an ethic speech (Neil Leach). "The result is a scenario that is extraordinarily rich in machines and technical processes which are being unceasingly improved ever since, but the effective outcome produced by these results is, apart from rare and fortunate exceptions, below average."¹³ Both Alberto Pérez-Gómez and Louise Pelletier share this skepticism when they suggest that the use of this "other" reality (of digital representation) has not contributed to the qualitative improvement of social space: "Even for architects who believe in the significance of fragmentation and complex geometries, computers have contributed next to nothing toward destructing the hegemony of panoptic space and proposing a more meaningful and participatory urban space"¹⁴. Claiming that virtual space has contributed to the emptying of real space (especially as far as public space is concerned) has become a cliché, but this is not entirely true. Cities like Porto do not lose 5000 inhabitants to the virtual space, but to the periphery. In other words, "neither has theater emptied life, nor has the bicycle emptied the walk".

12 "Architecture serves beauty, the search for beauty: architecture as an art. It seems that it exists a certain forbearance, when it does not refuse to consider the artistic values of architecture, in my spirit they are always there, I wouldn't even be doing architecture if, besides the service I referred to (...) I wasn't moved by a search for beauty; I know that there is a whole theorization of architecture as a non art. (...) but to me architecture is an art (...)" (Álvaro Siza: video recording to the Seminar Para que Serve a Arquitectura?: org. DAAUM, Guimarães, 12/13-11-2006, Sinaivideo Edition).

13 Machado: "Repensando Flusser e as Imagens Técnicas", Revista de Comunicação e Linguagem #25-26, p. 40.

14 Pérez-Gómez and Pelletier: Architectural Representation and the Perspective Hinge, p. 377.

Opposing a "virtual", "digital" and "media covered" universe to another that is "real", "analogue", "direct" means the simplification of the structure of a problem to such an extent that it will turn it into a false question. Knowing how to circumvent a simplistic bipolarity means to position ourselves in several places at the same time, contradicting the sole place of the observer within the device of perspectivism. Tendentiously, we declare that the required ubiquity seems eased by the cyberspace¹⁵. We are complex beings living in complex worlds, and we are used to permanently negotiate our position. As Edmond Couchot states, we are a "double subject": "ever since the invention of perspective (...) the art of images has never ceased to become automated. At each step of this automation, the producer of images sees its function being maimed, altered or dislocated by technique, which takes increasingly more space in figuration operations. S/He is therefore forced to constantly redefine him/herself, in face of the image, as a subject. A double subject nevertheless: on the one hand a subject associated to the technical processes and on the other hand, an author, an original founder, unbending to any automatism to which he opposes what it belongs to him – its subjectivity."¹⁶ We negotiate art in technique and this is what allows us to escape what Flusser calls the "officers of the productive system"¹⁷. We negotiate the virtual in the real and the real in the virtual.

15 On "the pulverization of perspective", see Rodrigues, "Contributos para uma Genealogia do Virtual", p. 91, and Wolfgang Strauss: "Painting, photography and television are traditionally connected to a static observer that, ever since the development of frontal perspective, in the Renaissance, has symbolized a distanced approach, almost objective. The Technologies of virtual reality anticipate, on one hand, an observer in motion that yet it is in the image. The dynamism and constant change are the key elements of interactive media, and the observer also is surrounded by illusion. Its movement/motion and localization in space determine the perspectives and ways to see things. He is in the illusion. Linear spaces with static perspectives and fixed positions of the observer are now history (...) space is no longer a place but a mean." (Strauss: "Entre o 0 + 1: Ampliar os Limites do Espaço" Revista de Comunicação e Linguagem #25-26, p. 190).

16 Couchot: "Tecnologia da Simulação – Um Sujeito Aparelhado", Revista de Comunicação e Linguagem, #25-26, p. 23.

17 Dependent and restricted by the limits of technique. See Machado: "Repensando Flusser e as Imagens Técnicas", p. 35.

In this swampland, we stand in a position that is "uncertain", but nonetheless stimulating, as Jean Nouvel proposes through his building of the Cartier Foundation, in Paris. This building displays "an intentional fusion amongst real and virtual", in a way that we no longer know if we are looking to a real or virtual image: "I don't know if we are looking at the reflection of the sky, or to the sky through the glass, to the reflection of the tree or to the tree itself, if it is one or two trees"¹⁸. Although the use of the word "virtual" is somehow excessive on Nouvel's part (since the reflections originate in real or material existences), it emphasized the need for an assumption of an exact incomprehension about the object and the claim for a subjectivity, opposed to the illusion that exists a single truth or a reality in the object (in any object). In a close reading of Jean Nouvel's words, and within the context of the reflections about the Cartier Foundation, we understand that he imprints other dimension to the word "virtual": "these are the means by which architecture creates a virtual space or a mental space; a way to delude the senses. But it is essentially the way to preserve an area of destabilization"¹⁹. (We know that, at least ever since Narcissus, reflection has always been a reason for destabilization!). This way, Nouvel reinforces the distinction between the object and its perception, enlarging its meaning as a result, close to the point of elapsing the significant — the building that is dematerialized in "tree" or "sky" in this manner.

Paul Virilio sees in these glass architectures, made of transparency, of reflections, a metaphor to the "disappearance of substance". To this author, the "substance" has been defined by "mass" and by "energy" throughout the centuries, but, nowadays, there is the need for another dimension to define "substance" — "information": "nowadays, information weighs a lot more than substance and energy. The third dimension of substance takes the place of the thing itself. There is a resemblance with the quote from Flaubert: «l'image vaut plus que la chose dont elle est image»"²⁰. Although this information goes the opposite way of that of the «area of destabilization» proposed by Nouvel (information moves the opposite way of subjectivity), they will still share the same "virtual dimension" of

architecture, which subtly takes the place of its material or physical existence. To Virilio, the "media buildings" — buildings covered with communicating surfaces such as LCD screens, LED systems, Jumbotron technology, etc... — that begin to invade the cosmopolitan cities, are now a symptom, even if a subtle one, of the disease that is to come: the "disappearance of architecture". Nonetheless, it is worth noting, that Virilio avers that this disappearance does not mean elimination, but invisibility, something that we know that exists, but we do not feel, something that is beyond the surface: "just like the Atlantic, which continues to be there even though you can no longer feel it as you fly over it"²¹. It is not easy to imagine this happening or to make general statements, but we all have been through the experience of letting all the surrounding space escape and entering a distant world by the simple gesture of turning on the television or the computer.

In an article entitled "Antitectonics: The Poetics of Virtuality"²², William J. Mitchell brings to mind the words of Virilio when he speaks about the dematerialization of architecture by the gradual process of abandoning its "tectonic" in benefit of its "electronic"; a wordplay that expresses a whole visualization of physical space, from its conception to its utilization. Mitchell, though enthusiastic of technology, reminds us that there are irreplaceable substances. In several occasions, Bill Gates' house, in Washington Lake, was acknowledged as the perfect example of an "intelligent house", but it is Bill Gates himself who discards this illusion: a set of monitors embedded in a wall covered in wood would work as a "virtual window", displaying several types of images and information. When not in use, Gates wanted the monitors to project images with the same texture of the wood that covered the wall, so that they would be invisible, but it was not an easy task: "I could never achieve anything convincing with current technology, because a monitor emits light while real wood reflects it. So I settled for having the monitors disappear behind wood panels when they're not in use"²³.

18 Jean Nouvel interviewed by Baudrillard: *The Singular Objects of Architecture*, p. 8.

19 Idem.

20 See Virilio: "Architecture in the age of its Virtual Disappearance", *The Virtual Dimension*, p. 180.

21 Idem, p. 187.

22 Mitchell: "Antitectonics: The Poetics of Virtuality", *The Virtual Dimension*, p. 205–217.

23 Bill Gates quoted by Mitchell: quoted piece of work, p. 215.

So far, architecture has been producing more metaphors of digital and virtual culture than tangible results. But, as Jean Nouvel states, the use of these concepts enables us to "create more than what we see"²⁴.

Throughout the centuries, the household space was organized taking into account where the fire was placed; several decades ago, it was organized around television and computers in what seems to have been one of the most meaningful transformations in the living space. But did things change that much? In an article called "Visions' Unfolding: Architecture in the Age of Electronic Media"²⁵, 1992, Peter Eisenman stated that the transition of paradigm from a "mechanical" era to an "electronic" era did not seem to affect architecture, "since architecture has traditionally been a stronghold of what is considered to be real". According to Eisenman this construction of "real", somehow, still derived from the mechanisms of visualization inherited from the Renaissance period, especially the perspective that places the subject in a "monocular and anthropocentric", and hence, hierarchized space — organizing it in an unquestionable and objective manner. With the advent of the electronic age, reality began to be defined by the media and through simulation; superimposing "appearance" over "existence"; in which "to see" is not exactly the same as "to know" and that will certainly imply a highly interpretative and ambiguous vision: "Media introduces fundamental ambiguities into how and what we see. Architecture has resisted this question because, since the importation and absorption of perspective by architectural space in the fifteenth century, architecture has been dominated by the mechanics of vision. Thus architecture assumes sight to be preeminent and also in some way natural to its own process, not a thing to be questioned"²⁶. In this text we sense the presence of a total nonconformism in face of a planimetric and rationalized vision of the world. As an alternative, Eisenman proposed to reconsider, according to Deleuze and his concept of "fold", all the vision of the traditional structure (the relations of

vertical/horizontal, figure/ background, inside/outside), claiming a "temporal modulation" or a "variable curvature" that expresses the transition from an "effective space" to an "affective space"²⁷ or, in our simplified reading, the transition from an illusive objectivity to a more satisfying subjectivity ("more than reason, sense and functionality"). Through this change of paradigm, Eisenman produces a rupture between vision and reason, or mind; between subject and representation, or drawing; between drawing and space, or reality. The expectation does not have to do with the release of architecture from what it has always been: "four walls that defy gravity" (function, structure and aesthetic), but with the fact that these four walls will no longer express the mechanical paradigm in benefit of other speeches: "the other affective senses of sound, touch, and of that light lying within the darkness"²⁸.

Through Eisenman, we find the arguments that not only enable us to challenge the vision mechanisms of the Cartesian space, but also to challenge the construction of its linear reality, therefore, predicting in the digital paradigm and in its images, the possibility of a more complex construction, based in the conditions of "time" and "event". Whether we want it or not. ■

24 Jean Nouvel interviewed by Baudrillard: *The Singular Objects of Architecture*, p. 7.

25 Eisenman: "Visions' Unfolding: Architecture in the Age of Electronic Media", *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Antology of Architecture Theory 1965-1995*, p. 556-561.

26 Idem, p. 557.

27 Idem, p. 559.

28 Idem, p. 561.