

Against the Hijacking of the Multitude

Introduction

Jean-Luc Godard once said: “The problem is not to make a political film, but to make film politically.” I would like to say the same for architecture: The problem is not to make political architecture, but to make architecture politically. It is this urgent question I will try to address: how to make architecture politically given the new transurban society, where architecture can no longer sustain its profound isolation?

We are living through a transition from one society to another. We all experience and live our lives in the new world, but the morphological, topographical, tectonic, space and time concepts, the panoptical maps and what is conservative (right-wing) or progressive (left-wing), things which helped us to navigate in the past, are no longer of much help in understanding and bringing the laboratory of civilization further.

Yet a very important paradigm shift has taken place in the culture of architecture: we are dealing again with the issues of society at large in all its complexity, shifting away from Cartesian logic, and relating to our everyday mass culture. The focus of this essay is my concern that an architecture operating in this fascinating condition of transition is in need of a political agenda too. Most designers “just” embrace what is out there without being aware of or willing to develop propositions other than what the market already projects. We are in need of a political stance, a positioning, or a constant becoming, within a project which goes beyond the agenda of global capitalism. This political stance has to be a totally different one than the ones we know from the past.

To Venture into the Multitude

To venture into the multitude of our society (or the mesh of our second modernity) and to believe in the multitude is what the recent practices of people like Rem Koolhaas and MVRDV demonstrate. In their practices they are searching for a dialogue in which the cultural has been "folded into" the economic. This attitude is closely related to the idea of movement, of a constant becoming, instead of searching for a totality. The multitude is not to be understood as a hybridity, but as a kind of diaspora, because a diaspora entails movement while a hybridity is timeless. The projects of these architects are not so much concerned with the definition of what architecture is, but with what it can do. They are open works that

spark permanent spatial dialogues that never result in a consensus. The foundational question is of no interest in this approach. You never know what the given is until you find it out in the doing.

We have to understand that this “recent” position of many contemporary avant-garde offices is quite different from both the positions of Henri Lefebvre and Guy Debord (the two best-known Situationists), who were in fact the first to celebrate the multiple modalities and temporalities of the everyday as a potential field to be liberated. Lefebvre and Debord identified the urban environment as a unique site for contesting the alienation of modern capitalist society, and believed that this alienation could be overcome, rendering individuals whole once again. I acknowledge instead that fragmentation and incompleteness are inevitable conditions for living in our actuality. I do not seek overarching solutions. There is no universal answer to be found, only a multiplicity of responses to specific times and places.

It is this complication that a new progressiveness should embrace, as opposed to the universalism of the neoliberal, as in for instance the Third Way politics of Anthony Giddens and Tony Blair. I believe that when we are enthusiastic and acknowledge the multitude with its retroactive manifest (“just out there”) qualities, we need another insight as well. We need to create a new kind of subjectivity beyond the kinds of individuality and collectivity the multitude of the market generates. The paradises that the global market generates are rather poor. We need to produce another kind of public and private sphere, where the potentials of the multitude are no longer hijacked by the ideology of Americanization.

The attack on the World Trade Center can be seen as a symbol of what we could call the hijacking of the multitude. An extreme diversity of national, ethnic, and religious communities in New York City – a truly global public sphere in the most concrete sense – is reduced to a purely symbolic image. We could call this practice of the Bush administration, in the words of Susan Buck-Morss, “visual fundamentalism.” Striking is the speed with which every image taken of the New York City disaster was reduced within a week to one image, the American flag, and under it one caption: “The nation under attack.” President Bush is defending a kind of multitude, in fact an oligopticum (a hybridity), which is based on control, violence and surveillance, produced by a culture of the multitude in which the information society plays a dominant role.

Today we no longer live in a society of discipline in which the state or other institutions of gender, class and spatial arrangements dominate our behavior from above. Instead, our reflective capacities as individuals are constantly addressed. We have to choose between different options all the time in order to be in control of our own biographies, without being aware that only very specific choices are offered. In many cases the options are not so much a matter of what is being offered to us, but what is not shown to us at all. We are confronted with the illusion of free choice and the idea of interactivity, while we are in fact controlled through our choices, located in the multitude which media and design produce.

When we jump into the multitude we must investigate – and this is more urgent than ever after 9/11 – if within the current multitude a more ideological position, as opposed to the one of Americanization, or sameness disguised as difference, could be implemented. We have to implement alternative ideas. Within the stoppages of the network we should create allowances beyond the multitude dominated by the market. The theory of retroactive manifesto is not enough for making architecture politically and for overcoming the hijacking of the multitude by the challenges which the market generates.

The problem for me is that the discovery and exposure of the multitude dimensions in our cities by many innovative architectural practices fail to install alternative political propositions – that is why their multitude can be so easily hijacked. What can we do to make the future different from the past? We don't just have to map the existing dynamic programs we find within the milieu of the multitude, resample and give them a spatial and temporal expressivity; we have to invent new nonlinear programs on top of it, within and by it, to renew from within, and dare to have a stance (a proposition) in relation to it, to create other options to choose from besides the ones the market provides.

Collaging the options provided by the market are not enough. A clear example in architecture of the multitude being hijacked by design is MVRDV's Hanover Expo pavilion. I don't blame the architects; I appreciate their experiments in working from within our society of the multitude; but there are tremendous risks. In this building the next phase of artificial Dutch "super-traditionalism" is being branded through the multitude. Stacked landscapes with the updated versions of the famous clichés of the Netherlands, like windmills, tulips and the artificial

landscape, are being promoted. This architecture promotes a culture of the multitude, where the radical immanent democratic potential of the multitude is cancelled out almost in the same way that the attack on the Twin Towers was hijacked by Americanization. It is of no surprise that the Dutch government celebrated the success of this building.

Without a clear political stance of resistance, the market will hijack the subversive qualities of a talented designed multitude, based on the systematic idealization of data found in our second modernity. The problem with many new forms and concepts like the MVRDV Hanover Expo pavilion is not that they are new, and neither that they are formal or fashionable or fascinated with the everyday and part of our commodity economy, but that they replicate the neoliberal systems of the multitude itself, very much including its needed excitement and freshness. The complication today is that the market operates through open works or qualities of the multitude as well.

I believe that if we want to make sure that a new architecture doesn't replicate the system with excitement (in my words, creating a "fresh conservatism" which orients itself to the future), then we are in need of something more. Architecture is not just an "image" (representation) of social order; it can also be an instrument in imposing another order. When we are voluntarily and willingly folding into the multitude and aware of the risk of the hijacking of the multitude by certain futuristic conservative powers, creating a fresh conservative design, what then do we need to overcome this opportunism?

The Practice and Theory of Cinema

I believe that the practice and theory of cinema can be a helpful medium in seeing how architecture can move beyond fresh conservatism in our multitude society of permanent transformations. We should understand cinema as a medium not about representing a world we already have, but as a medium capable of creating new worlds, just as architecture can create new worlds. Film and theater are about telling stories (1) and developing scenarios instead of an autonomous object. It is not the construction itself that is the driving force, but how the aesthetic complex can make a narrative unfold and incite the viewer to see, debate and experience the world differently.

Filmmakers are concerned with the kind of "effects" or reflective dialogues they can incite in the audience. Architects often only consider

the object as a world in itself without taking into account its unconscious value system and the way it directs certain ideological intentions. When architects are more aware of what kind of stories or activities the space is unfolding, a deeper understanding of the spatial culture they produce can be gained. The traditional language of architecture is in no way capable of doing this. In order to tell stories the language of film and theater uses all kinds of visual techniques (2), including *mise en scène*. It is these visual techniques which could help architects understand their work in a world which is unfolding more and more through the culture of the image or the idea of display.

A third aspect is that film always deals with sequences of time or periodicalizations in space (3). Film is capable of creating what Deleuze calls “mobile sections.” Cinema takes us away from the immobilized sections we impose on time, to mobile sections. Mobile sections present the moving of movement, not a movement to be understood as organized and fixed by some static point of view. It is not so much the point of departure in these mobile sections that is essential, but the motion that leads us from one image to another. And we have to understand that the visible (information) is contained neither in a single isolated image nor in something external to images, but in a series of edited images, a path through different views, a course, a formalization, an act of linking information¹.

I will discuss the film *Celebration (Festen)* by Thomas Vinterberg to make clear that film – as multitude medium par excellence with a long tradition of critique – can help us to go beyond the hijacking of the multitude such as we see in the MVRDV Expo pavilion. Film also opposes the naive belief that the multitude itself already creates enough alternative worlds. I will analyze the film *Celebration* by looking at three aspects applied in the method used by Vinterberg: (1) the narrative, (2) the stance, and (3) the aesthetic devices. All these three elements are simultaneously operative, they cannot be understood separately.

1) *The narrative*

A grand party to celebrate a father’s 60th birthday unleashes a family drama, with all the lies that conceal the horrendous secrets of incest. The eldest son, Christian, stages a showdown with the popular paterfamilias; his provocative, moving after-dinner speech dislodges all the masks, which finally fall completely as the father-son conflict intensifies with

bewildered guests looking on. The structure as well as the performance tells a clear and rich story, specifying complex circumstances and their effect on the human flesh and behavior, playfully and painfully. We immediately recognize our own everyday culture and its almost unconscious banal qualities.

Celebration is not a Hollywood film with a happy end full of commodified beauties or anti-heroes. Nor is it a critical commentary on the bourgeois class (such as traditional Marxism would make) – that would be an “accident,” according to Vinterberg. Rather, what defines the authentic speech and action in the film is what defies or subverts representation as a social force.

In this film it is child abuse which is “celebrated” to displace the characters and expose the idealized image of the non-nuclear family. In fact the story rejects the middle-class model of the family in order to provoke other, less commodified and controlled, extended family structures. It opens up other possibilities between family members and produces another public sphere beyond the upheld clichés. Liberation takes place, through and with the clichés, not by disqualifying them. The structure of the story not only communicates a clear storyline, it is dialogical as well. The Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin defines “dialogism” as a world dominated by a “heteroglossia,” where there is a constant interaction between meanings in the story, all of which can potentially influence the others. “Dialogization” occurs when a word, discourse, language, or culture becomes relativized and deprivileged, and is subject to competing definitions for the same things. Undialogized language remains authoritarian or absolute. To dialogize architecture challenges the conceptual hierarchy under which most designers operate. One could say that through the introduction of an absurd element (something unconsumable) – in this film, incest – a certain anxiety and/or alienation is introduced and exposed in order to activate different differences with liberating potential. The disenchanting element of incest introduced in the story is clearly there not to satisfy us, but to challenge us, to liberate us. Vinterberg also stressed that incest was chosen not so much to put it on the political agenda – he is not interested in all the conspiracy and victim stories which judge how bad and horrific incest is – but “used” in the film to allow the multitude of the family, through its clichés, to emerge again, and to free it from its negative entanglements. The film breaks through the symbolic representation of all the people

involved and starts to awaken alternative and liberating becomings which would otherwise stay hidden and impossible. In *Celebration* we are confronted with a kind of progressive becoming that allows no one to have an authentic voice, but those who cannot speak, or those made empty and vulnerable by the pain, suddenly find another way, are given another permission to speak and to build a multitude beyond the limits and good manners of the family.

The Guggenheim museums in Las Vegas designed by OMA and Rem Koolhaas try to communicate with banal middle class culture in the same manner as *Celebration*. Commodification is clearly here the basic condition for creating a deeper social value. The two museums, the Jewel Box and the Big Box, are placed right in the middle of the virtual real of The Venetian in Las Vegas. The margin is not sought to locate resistance; instead the museums are put right in the middle of our pleasure culture. Like *Celebration*, it seeks to activate another creative potential right in the middle of the mesh, in coexistence with mass culture. It makes clear that the old notion of critical distance is outdated, even impossible.

To put a museum, a jewel box and big industrial exhibition box, within the casino labyrinth of slot machines and perfect simulations of Venice, is in another way, like the film *Celebration*, an incestuous act. In the same way that Vinterberg uses incest to break open the family, Koolhaas uses the technique of displacement and alienation to provoke speechlessness to speak again. Or, as Koolhaas remarked, to give the art back “a degree of protection and definition to retain its aura.” Both *Celebration* and the feast of the Guggenheim Hermitage museum thus try to frame a politics of speechlessness.

The museums in Las Vegas, like the film *Celebration*, communicate with the masses and create dialogical conditions within the mesh of the multitude. The viewer and user/visitor start to see different experiences and are confronted with different viewpoints on the trajectory through the spatial and filmic spaces of transformations. The narratives of Vinterberg and of Koolhaas create a genuine two-way street, and feedback. They use the contradictions from within everyday (banal) society, but at the same time allow and energize other voices, because they give the multiplicity a chosen directionality (stance) which is linked to a progressive idea beyond the mesh which is just out there.

2) *The stance, or positioning*

As I explained earlier, it is almost impossible to deal separately with all three aspects of (1) the narrative (the programmatic), (2) the stance (or taking a position) and (3) the aesthetic. They operate simultaneously. In fact one could say that the stance is the hidden stratifying factor. Both *Celebration* and the Guggenheim museums try to let the speechless speak again. Both makers argue for a social program that was stripped away in the fundamentalist image of the multitude we find normally in Las Vegas and the family. Suddenly, through the trajectory of the clichés of both the casino and the family, other, radical options start to emerge. Suddenly commodification and liberation can go together.

The stance is not about having an opinion or giving a final answer. This is why the stance is dialogical. It doesn't want to be paternalistic or celebrate a better future full of authentic moments and without alienation. It sees alternatives not by going back or stepping out, but precisely by “embracing” the schizophrenic condition of life (even when it is perhaps feared). The work is opening it up, through a positioning in the work, by means of its technique and narrative. The trajectory through space is as important a dialogical device as the imaginary of the materiality steered by the image. But for the sake of argument I focus on the culture of the image of the project and not so much on the trajectory (of materiality) incorporated in the project¹.

The Guggenheim museums in Las Vegas are a kind of *mise en scène*, a stage set through which a very specific trajectory unfolds, freeing architecture from the obligation of the symbolic, or in the words of Serge Daney, from the visual: “If the visual keeps us from seeing (because it prefers that we decode, that we decipher, that we “read”), the image always challenges us to carry out a montage with others, with *some other*. Because in the image, as in democracy, there is ‘free play,’ unfinished pieces, gaps, openings.”

“There is not just one mood in such images,” says Bertolt Brecht, “but a diversity of moods. And while the painter Breughel brings his contradictions in balance, he never equalizes them with each other.” The Guggenheim compresses the building into a social condenser to become a place of experiment, pushed to its contradictions, but not without a progressive stance. More people will go to see art because it is located in the hellhole of the superb virtual world of entertainment, but the exhibition

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spaces itself are stripped bare to allow art to speak. The building gives the speechless a voice. Culture is exhibited in the backstage spaces of the entertainment industry, which are normally hidden from view. Hopefully the roughness of these bizarre museums helps the public to experience art and culture beyond the perfect simulation of the Las Vegas strip.

C) The aesthetic devices

Let's look at some techniques, or aesthetic devices, which both Vinterberg and Koolhaas use in addressing their progressive stance against the hijacking of the multitude. Here I will discuss just two: aesthetic roughness and "trucage." The Jewel Box, for instance, with its Cor-Ten steel walls remind us of the velvet walls of the Hermitage museum in St. Petersburg, and the volume is indeed a kind of jewel box slipped under the kitschy dresser of the Venetian.

But if you look carefully you see that there is a war going on. The Cor-Ten steel is not the same as the velvet of the Hermitage in St. Petersburg.

Although the space seems to be a very smooth and traditional museum space, the pivoting and Cor-ten detailing (the floating of the heavy wall above the Las Vegas casino carpet) introduce a certain roughness which goes beyond the simulacrum of the visual. Instead it activates the user, the viewer. The Cor-ten steel acts almost like Barnett Newman's painting *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue?*

In the Big Box we are confronted with almost an industrial hall for machinery, instead of a perfect smooth, neutral white museum space. The space is a degree-zero architecture. After the supervisible world of Las Vegas, we enter an almost non-visible world, where we can really start experiencing again, beyond the total control of the simulacrum. The museum has almost no façade. In contrast to the Frank Gehry brand-style in Bilbao, we are confronted with nothing but an interior. Like Vinterberg, Koolhaas introduces a kind of war, a conflict which does not destroy the story, but in fact opens up dialogue and communication between viewer and user.

In *Celebration*, Vinterberg used many small handheld digital cameras to get close to the conflictive dimensions of the party. The images are rough and provisional, like the Guggenheim's velvet Cor-ten steel walls. The roughness of the digital camera, the wild movement and natural light create a blurred focus, an opacity and performability which undermine the finality of the film. The same can be said for the

Guggenheim. It is an aesthetic complex where the details do not so much refer to themselves, but are there to activate the stance and narrative to be unfolded.

Christian Metz spoke about the quality of, and need for, "trucage" in film. The trucage in *Celebration* and the Guggenheim Las Vegas can be understood as the undermining of a monumental structure devoted to its own preservation. A delicate provisional framework is proposed instead, open to interpretation. In fact, the roughness introduced by the aesthetic complex in both works introduces a kind of irrationality or absurdity that breaks open the commodity.

Henri Lefebvre pointed out that although experts and intellectuals are embedded in everyday life, they prefer to think of themselves as outside and elsewhere. Convinced that everyday life is trivial, they attempt to evade it. They use rhetorical language, meta-language or autonomous language as "permanent substitutes for experience, allowing them to ignore the mediocrity of their own condition." Vinterberg and Koolhaas embrace the everyday culture in all its mediocrity, and the bizarre possibilities we all share. They are not against mass culture, but use its hidden qualities in order to create liberating options.

In this article I have tried to warn against the opportunistic idea of "simply" embracing the multitude. We must instead allow another culture of the multitude to emerge. We must install different kinds of dreams than the ones the market generates. *Celebration* and the Guggenheim Las Vegas speak a kind of foreign language, opening other worlds from within the multitude. In the words of Deleuze, they create a kind of stammering of all values and ideologies while they are still in place. They produce a kind of radicalization of our everyday condition while maintaining, not eliminating, communication with the normality of the everyday. This foreign language, initiated from a clear stance in relation to the multitude, provokes us to speak and to open a dialogue in which those who do not speak can begin to speak. This is a kind of antagonism, socially regulated and controlled, which will subsist under the form of what could be called a "war of position." Each pole of the conflict will have a certain power and will exercise a certain violence over the other pole. The paradoxical corollary of this conclusion is that the existence of antagonisms is the very condition of a free society. This is because antagonism results from the fact that the social is not a plurality of effects

radiating from a pre-given center, but is pragmatically constructed from many starting points.

1. Indeed, the phenomena never appear in the image, but nevertheless become visible through what they transform, through what is transported; it morphs from one image to another, from one point of view to another. A trace must link them, to allow us to circulate back and forward along this path. Architecture, in a different manner of course, also installs trajectories through space where users and passersby create traces.