

Architecture against architecture

Radical criticism within the society of the spectacle

"The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein. One could perhaps say that certain ideological conflicts animating present-day polemics oppose the pious descendants of time and the determined inhabitants of space."

Michael Foucault

"To arrive at the purity of the gaze is not difficult, it is impossible."

Walter Benjamin

"It is necessary to make images that are themselves capable of self-movement."

Gilles Deleuze

Radical immanent criticism

You cannot live in criticism. Architecture, in the first place, organizes a roof over our heads. We also know that every commonplace carries an ideological and cultural charge. Architecture, too, is almost inevitably part of the dominant ideologies. Architects build those ideologies. But isn't it now more essential than ever - in this world of commodification and the invisibility of political and economic power - not to underwrite the status quo in the discourse of building, but to interrogate it and simultaneously to develop a new perspective? A roof over our head is then not just an interpretation of the status quo in masonry, but intrinsically a criticism and an alternative. In my view, the practice of such a radical immanent criticism¹ can only succeed if it takes the current urban condition and that of the visual culture as its point of departure.

The concept of radical immanent criticism is inspired by traditions drawn from film, literature and theatre, from the ideas of the International Situationists and from recent studies of the urban field and of social theory. It is a form of criticism that tries to unmask the representation of institutions, but without disqualifying that representation or the predominant visual culture in its own right. 'Unmasking' is not something you do in order to uncover an authentic ideal unsullied by the spectacle, but to break the representation open. The aim is to be able to see realities that are free of a simulation where nothing matters any more. Seeking the authentic is a praiseworthy starting point, but a quest for authenticity that depends on the negation of spectacle is a hopeless, naïve struggle. It is more fruitful to seek a constant unmasking of all kinds of institutional values that reside and hide in our society of the spectacle. This implies that movement, dialogue and conflict are primary. Hope lies in the permanent unmasking of alienation. After all, in everyday life there will always be alienation. And without alienation there can be no philosophy.

I shall try to elucidate radical immanent criticism by comparing the ideas of Rem Koolhaas with those of Quentin Tarantino, David Lynch and Jean Luc Godard. The films of the latter three offer interesting parallels with the cinematographic approach of architect Rem Koolhaas.

¹ The term is taken from the theory of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe: *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London, 1985. Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, London, 1993.

Criticism and the representation of reality

The logic of film² is once again high on the agenda of many architects. Besides film providing a source of inspiration for 'star architecture'³, it has a long tradition of immanent criticism⁴. Film is not only interesting because it captures the time, space and movement of everyday life in a fictitious (plane) representation⁵, but because it can also offer a set of instruments for the discussion of reality⁶. In this context, architects and filmmakers can venture out in search of a different reality within the culture of spectacle. With reference to this, Walter Benjamin states: "By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action. Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling. With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended (...) An unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man ... The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses."⁷

The dazzling orgy of spectacle

Humanity is becoming more and more enthralled by spectacle. In this condition, it is no longer the 19th century regime of the true that dominates, but the regime of spectacle.

² The work of e.g. Nouvel and Tschumi is strongly inspired by film culture.

³ Since the nineteenth century, film has provided an excellent medium for investigating modernism in respect of technique and theory. Simultaneously with the development of film, we became conscious of motion in space and time in philosophy, art and architecture. See e.g. Anthony Vidler, *The Explosion of Space: Architecture and the Filmic Imaginary, Assemblage 21, 1993*.

⁴ See: Robert Stam: *Reflexivity in Film and Architecture, From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc-Godard*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1985.

⁵ The architect Robert Mallet-Stevens observed in 1925 that "... it is undeniable that the cinema has a marked influence on modern architecture; in turn, modern architecture brings its artistic side to the cinema.... Modern architecture not only serves the cinematographic set [décor]. but imprints its stamp on the staging [mise-en-scène], it breaks out of its frame; architecture 'plays.'" And for film makers who trained as architects (e.g. Lang, Kracauer, Eisenstein), film naturally has the potential to develop a new architecture of space and time, unfettered by the constraints of gravity and everyday reality.

⁶ See also Wim Wenders: *The Act of Seeing, "Find myself a city to live in..."*, Verlag der Autoren, 1992. Wim Wenders in conversation with architect Hans Kollhoff. "Das Verbindendste [between architecture and film], kommt mir vor, ist, daß beide Künste viel mit Geld und trotzdem direkt mit der Frage zu tun haben, die die Leute am meisten angeht, nämlich >> Wie soll man leben?<< Im Kino wird die Frage auf eine andere Art beantwortet als in der Architektur. Die Architektur stellt die Frage natürlich viel konkreter, viel langfristiger. Im Gebauten soll man dann wirklich leben, im Kino werden nur Fragen gestellt oder hin und wieder auf die eine oder andere Weise beantwortet - während die Architektur immer die Frage und Antwort in einem ist und eventuell dann eine Antwort, die heißt <lebenslang>. Das ist halt Gott sie Dank im Kino nicht der Fall, da kann man auch rausgehen, wenn man will. (...) Also man lebt natürlich mit der Architektur ganz anders als mit dem Film und trotzdem stellen beide dieselbe frage, >>Wie soll man leben<< Bevor man einem film macht oder bevor man einde Stadt ändert, ist die Fragestellung die gleiche."

⁷ Walter Benjamin cited in Anthony Vidler, *The explosion of Space: Architecture and the Filmic Imaginary, Assemblage 21, 1993*.

Guy Debord formulated it in 1967 as follows: "The entire existence of societies where modern production relations prevail presents itself as one huge accretion of spectacles. Everything directly experienced has been consigned to a depiction." Experience makes way for the registering of impressions. A hiatus occurs between the external perception and the internal experience.

In our subconscious, the complex mechanisms of Late Capitalism rule. Reduction, fragmentation of time and space, hierarchization, globalization and alienation are the dominant principles. The intellectual consciousness, as opposed to the subconscious, is characterized by an excess of thought. Razor-sharp analyses of society follow one after another in rapid succession, without having any bearing on daily reality. As practising architect, you no longer know where to look. Every innovative move is doomed to failure from the start. The only thing that proves durable is a specialized, mesmerizing style. The architectural profession shuts itself up in an aesthetic vacuum. We live in a schizophrenic situation where the dominant reality is concealed behind an extremely visible and ostensibly liberal pseudo-reality. In short, the critical tradition is going through a crisis. Being a practical intellectual, the architect should work, as Edward Said put it, as a "spirit in opposition, rather than accommodation. (...) the intellectual, in my sense of the word, is neither a pacifier nor a consensus builder, but someone whose whole being is staked on a critical sense, a sense of being unwilling to accept easy formulas or ready-made clichés, or smooth, ever-so-accommodating confirmations of what the powerful or conventional have to say and what to do. (...) One task of the intellectual is the effort to break down the stereotypes and reductive categories that are so limiting to human thought and communication."⁸ In other words it is not so much a question of how architectural criticism can serve architecture, but of how architecture may be a medium for critical activity.

Criticism as movement instead of negation

The greater part of the critical tradition attempts to ignore the spectacle. It is a criticism of despair. The critic seeks the authentic, the spiritual, the bodily, the craftsmanlike or the unsullied. He believes in a better world that is unaffected by the technological revolution. This is the criticism of negation. It disqualifies and reacts rather unobtrusively against the achievements of the contemporary condition. Escape is seen as the only hope - minute though this hope may be. This is an understandable response because history teaches us that every avant-garde movement, in its attempt to combat the poverty of life, is immediately cut off from life by the large-scale middle-class culture, by means of the commercial mechanism, only at some later stage to be valued and praised as avant-garde. Bourgeois society exercises control by rejection followed by acceptance. The idea of art giving meaning to daily life no longer has any chance of prospering. Art alone appears incapable of unmasking the spectacle.

A position outside the commodity system is now becoming increasingly untenable. Victor Burgin rightly remarks that "The market is behind nothing, it is in everything." In the present condition it is no longer fruitful to believe in escaping. The criticism of negation blinds itself by making morality absolute, something external to its own position. It develops an alternative, independently of the situation in which finds itself. It places its own subjective viewpoint outside its own discourse. The critics' analyses of the current condition are vastly oversimplified, and they fail to note alternatives that live under the skin of the current condition. It is a denial that in the worst case operates affirmatively affect.

In my view, we need to develop a mode of criticism within the current conditions. The

⁸ Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, The 1993 Reith Lectures, London, Vintage, 1994

Situationist International was perhaps the last avant-garde movement, and came closest to such a strategy. The Situationists defined culture as a reflection of daily life and a guiding example for potential ways of organizing it in the context of a given historic moment; it was the totality of aesthetics, sensations, values and norms with which the community reacts to daily life. It tried to create situations in the urban condition that placed its own reality and that of art open to discussion. By means of *derivé* (drift), *détournement* (diversion), play and a 'unitary urbanism', they searched the urbane culture for another reality hiding behind the world of spectacle. Inspired by Surrealism, they thought that the imaginary, the poetic and the tactile had the potential to escape the rules of spectacle.

I do not think it is appropriate to develop an alternative to the contemporary condition by negating it - and thereby, in effect, losing one's way in the past or the future. The point is not to pursue a fixed ideal but to accept the necessity of movement. In various modern films, in city culture and in recent works of architecture, there can exist a type of space that has the properties of a neural net: one little bit can become linked to another in an infinity of different ways, rather than the links being predefined. This dynamism inspires a form of critical production that is interested not so much in the things in themselves as in the events that take place between and through things. It seeks experiences that reveal the hidden side of representation. It devolves into a situation of presentations where the actual, genuine experiences meet one another in an open dialogue - and in so doing, goes 'beyond'⁹ the banal, institutional, clichés of representation, without dismissing them as good or bad. This is a form of criticism of the regime that does not seek its alternative outside the regime, but implies rather an immanent criticism that aims to radicalize the modern existing situation from within. It is a constant re-identification that allows room for conflicts. Hence it is ambivalent and even schizophrenic in character. Every interpretation is constantly in motion. It is conscious of change because it is open to other points of view.¹⁰

The radical immanent criticism that I champion tries to make the experience of presentation primary. It thereby undermines representation. It un.masks representation.

In the words of Scott Lash,¹¹ "Representation is by definition monological, it is the fixed creation of a subject. Presentation, like play, is dialogical, it opens up and involves the playing off of one another of playmates. When a jazz band improvises it is like play. So is football when it's working, when a team is really knocking the ball around, creating openings, running of the ball, moving into space." According to Lash, emancipation does not come about through an ideal dialogue but through an aesthetic creation - as in jazz, for example. It does not happen through any transcendental aesthetic subjectivity, not again by representation, but by presentation, to be understood as 'performance'. It is not so much the representation as the presence of values that constitutes an event. It is not so much the aesthetic of the walled space as the aesthetic of the event that takes place within that walled space, the activity formulated in the pro-

⁹ See also Homi K. Bhabha in: *The Location of Culture*, London, 1994. "What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These "in-between" spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood - singular or communal - that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaborations, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself."

¹⁰ Of course I am not referring here to an attitude such as that recently expressed by Philip Johnson: "In architecture, you have to know what ground you stand on, and with me it's always shifting." Phillip Johnson, 9/27/95, *Architecture On Line*, Princeton WWW magazine, Quote of the Month.

¹¹ Scott Lash, *Difference or Sociality?*, Lecture for conference *The Theory of the Image*, Van Eyck Academy, Maastricht, 1995

gramme¹², that is of critical significance. Or, in Adorno's words, "Beauty today can have no other measure except the depth to which a work resolves contradictions. A work must cut through the contradictions and overcome them, not by covering them up, but by pursuing them." Whether the experience in this space acquires its meaning through a visual stimulus or a direct, tactile one is of lesser importance.

Characteristics of radical immanent criticism

Radical immanent criticism consists of a polyphony of different dimensions. They interact. Run parallel. They can intersect, contradict or ignore one another. It is a many-layered structure where the dimensional relationships can vary according to the economic and cultural context, the place, the project and the programme (typology and series of activities). What these dimensions have in common is that they have reflexive, simultaneous, deformational and depth-of-focus characteristics. In other words, they manipulate the stream of the river by joining the motion of the stream. "Movements, at the level of sports and habits, are changing." says Deleuze. "We have long put our faith in an energetic concept of motion: there is an external point of support, which implies that the body is the origin of its own movement. Running, setting ones weight in motion, etc. involves effort, resistance, with a starting point, a leverage. But we observe that the motion nowadays defines itself less and less on the basis of the use of a fulcrum. All new sports - surfing, wind-surfing, delta-wing flying (...) - are of the type 'meshing into an existing wave'. That means no longer having a source of effort as the starting point, but a way of coming into a trajectory. The way you allow yourself to be swept up in the motion of a big wave or of a rising column of air, 'arriving between' instead of being the origin of the effort, that is fundamental."¹³

Reflexivity

Reflexivity¹⁴ breaks with art as enchantment and calls attention to the factitiousness of their own constructs. The architect must make his own manipulation and that of the client and context visible in the work by incorporating references to the accepted codings. The work is recognizably artificial, a construct, an ideological instrument in the permanent discussion about contrasts in social reality. A cultural product of the kind has the metaphorical quality of self-contemplation. It is a strategy of criticism which aims to establish a continuous critical openness.

To avoid confusion, we distinguish two forms of reflexivity: an authentic and a narcotic reflexivity. The theory and practice of Bertold Brecht gives some insight into this. With authentic reflexivity, the spectator is actively involved. With many television programmes, by contrast, the consumer remains passive and is swamped with narcotic, culinary experiences. Television acts here like a rubber wall. You try to communicate with it, but every action simply bounces back at you. Brecht's goal was not to satisfy the audience expectations but to transform them, whereas the central impulse of commercial television is to transform only two things: the audience viewing habits and its buying habits. Brecht's goal was not to *be* popular in box-office terms but to *become* popular, that is, to create a new public for a new theatre linked to modes of social life, whereas commercial television's goal, at least from the point of view of its managers, is to be popular in the crudely quantitative terms of "ratings".

¹¹ See also: *The Invisible in Architecture*, Ole Bouman, Roemer van Toorn, London, 1994

¹³ Gilles Deleuze: *Het denken in plooiën geschikt* ['Thought arranged in folds'], Kampen 1992. Translated from the French: *Pourparlers: 1972-1990*, Paris, 1990.

¹⁴ *Reflexivity in Film and Architecture, From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc-Godard*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1985; Roemer van Toorn: *Archaism, Fascinism, Reflexivity. Three strategies of resistance*, European catalogue, Paris, 1994.

Simultaneity

Film and architecture are simultaneous in character. The succession of scenes in a montage creates a mental space that resists chronological comprehension. The attractive thing about architecture is that it makes space. It is the place of activity and movement. The user is his or her own film director. Architectural space is physical and, a fraction later in thought, like film, simultaneous in character. Film and architecture both make use of sequential movements through space.¹⁵ These are strung together by the memory. This spatial simultaneity is an important property for arriving at reflexivity. With this, we also run into a complication. Our society functions more and more by means not of totalitarian but pluralistic, simultaneous systems. The deregulated capitalism of today makes clever use of reflexivity.¹⁶ Expressions of power work most efficiently by means of subtle mechanisms that give an illusion of tolerance and, especially, of participation. The new multimedia (CD-ROM etc.) are for instance typical virtual technologies where the user is proactive and thus has the illusion of deciding for himself. Simultaneity is utterly operative, flexible and incomparably powerful. Simultaneity, ambiguity, schizophrenia and reflexivity are eminently suitable for keeping the present situation incomprehensible. It is essentially an evolved form of the nineteenth-century panopticon. This must not have the consequence that we dispense with the simultaneity of space. We must, rather, make use of this schizophrenic simultaneity in order to develop an open architecture of specificity and indeterminateness with a permanent capacity for bowling over the representations.

Détournement

The theoretician of the Situationists, Guy Debord, distinguished two kinds of *détournement*. On the one hand, a displacement can be the result of a small *détournement*. A small component, one that is not important to the whole, is changed, but it produces a whole new context of meanings. As in the Spanish Civil War - "Nice lips are red". The alienating *détournement* is, however, a conscious diversion of an intrinsically meaningful element, which demands another vision. This method, according to Debord, is a method for attacking institutions from within and thus opening a route for an open society in which the deliberate diversion has become permanent. With the *dérive* (drifting) through the everyday reality of the city, the Situationists created situations that challenged the spectacle-culture and the art within that reality. The deliberate diversion of everyday, recognizable aspects of our society has the advantage that it communicates with everyday life. Diversion is an important device for unmasking meaning-systems without necessarily exploding or denying them.

Montage and depth of focus

The film director Sergei Eisenstein, who had previously trained as an architect, once said: "If it moves, it is alive." For him, montage¹⁷ was the fourth dimension of film. "Intellectual montage", he considered, ought to be the principle of all arts. Collision and conflict were key concepts for him (in the twenties). The images stand in a dialectic relationship to one another, and lead through collision or conflict to a synthesis. This

¹⁵ The concept of simultaneity was discussed extensively by Edward W. Soja in *Postmodern Geographies, The reassertion of space in critical social theory*, London, 1989.

¹⁶ See e.g. Scott Lash & John Urry: *Economies of Signs & Space*, London, 1994. Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, Scott Lash; *Reflexive Modernization, Politics, tradition and aesthetics in the modern social order*, Oxford, 1994.

¹⁷ Sergei Eisenstein. *Montage Het constructie principe in de kunst* ["The Construction Principle in Art"], *Sunscrift 175*, Nijmegen, 1981.

subject was seen from a different angle by André Bazin. In 'Qu'est-ce que le cinéma'¹⁸, he criticized this montage because it leaves no room for ambiguity. The director should not direct the viewer but should leave him to give his own meanings to the film. The fragmentation of montage film, the organization of the images in time and the frequent use of figures of verbal language are the causes of montage film having such an imperative character. The montage should not be used to imply a structuring in time but should be incorporated into the plasticity of the image. The structure of the image that is composed in the depth dimension is, according to Bazin, much more realistic because the eye can explore it and seek its own meaning. The merit of Eisenstein's montage is that it inserts an aesthetic transformer. The meaning of this is not located in the image, but it is a shadow projected into the consciousness of the viewer by means of the montage. This is a method of adding things to the perceived reality that are not really there. There are also films that try to veil reality. These, according to Bazin, are films that evince a depth of focus. Depth of focus brings the viewer into a relationship with the image that is more intense than his relationship with reality. As a consequence of this, viewing this kind of film entails a more active mental attitude on the part of the viewer. Film ought to give reality back its original ambiguity, according to Bazin. And this is something we find in the neo-realism of Rossellini and others, and in the work of Jean Luc Godard.

Let us now go more deeply into the above-mentioned characteristics that initiate movement, by looking at the ideas of Godard, Tarantino, Lynch and Koolhaas against the background of radical immanent criticism. The architectural lesson we can draw from the work of these creative artists can be described as an 'architecture against architecture', because radical immanent criticism can not flourish under traditional architectural notions.

The contra-shot in the work of Godard and Koolhaas

Jean-Paul Fargier has observed that thanks to video, Godard was able to make the 'contra-shot' visible, to show the 'hidden face' of the image. This is a form of depth of focus, reflection, deformation and simultaneity making it possible that "Suddenly, in the same image, there exist two spaces that belong in different periods. (...) Two times, in all their relativity, interpenetrate, the whole surface fragments so that another space starts to become visible: a space that is synonymous with weightlessness."¹⁹ What presents itself is a contra-shot that is distinct from the material world depicted by the shot. Something emerges from the image as a plausible interpretation that does not reside in the things represented. This plausible world is not something illusionary, something that only exists in the viewer's mind. The plausible must necessarily have a *possible* existence which is consistent with the concrete images and the actions of the characters. In Godard's words, "It is not necessary to create a world, but the possibility of a world." For Godard, thus, the images are not what they are. The visible world is haunted by "the possibility of another world." The images are therefore not aesthetic in their beauty, solidity or completeness, but precisely in their transparency, fragility and potentiality. Godard's work is a tableaux of imperfect fragments that seek, in a crippled construction, in an open work of art, the obverse of the image. These images, in their incomplete state, thus do not offer themselves to our gaze as an object, but invite the gaze as it were to enter and slip between the components, the little things, the elements of which it is made up. The viewer has to force a way into the image in order to understand its essence. It is not a matter of seeing the things-in-themselves, but of pe-

¹⁸ André Bazin, *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma*, Paris, 1975.

¹⁹ Jean-Paul Fargier, "La face cachée de la lune" in: *Art Press: Spécial Godard*, no. 4 (1984-1985)

netration, of getting in between things.²⁰

Koolhaas writes architectural scenarios. His buildings offer a roof over our head, and represent and condense the many narratives that characterize life in the contemporary metropolis. He accelerates the super-now. There is no sense in denying what presents itself as reality. Just as with the programme of the constructivists, we have to accept "simultaneous collective viewing", according to Benjamin Buchloh, and further "actually to construct representations of the masses themselves, to depict the collectivity."²¹ . Instead of turning your back on our mass culture, you have to embed yourself into it. The majority of current architecture does not experiment with the contemporary condition. It accepts the status quo by recognizing or denying it. Architects, however, must make experiments. They must dare to take the risk of opening up avenues in the urban reality towards other realities. "By passing judgement, one becomes slow and rigid." says Koolhaas. "I would rather say that what matters is to postpone that judgement as long as possible, to weigh the problems as carefully as possible, and so to consider as many aspects as possible, both good and bad. In this sense I believe we function almost as a 'medium', precisely because, despite all, we are still practitioners: we are exposed to movements, tropisms and trends that continually bring new mutations along, and in my view we sense things of that kind before they have penetrated to our conscious minds." Koolhaas is interested in urban culture because unlike architecture it is open in character. It offers a wealth of unprecedented opportunities. It does not consist like architecture only of precisely formulated restrictions. Koolhaas designs projects in which various dimensions of urban culture are brought together in a compact, abstract form. There is a congestion of spaces, functions, programmes, voids, structures, access routes, public and private domains. Almost as though in an infinite labyrinth, the disparate elements intersect and collide with one another. A critical moment results because, owing to their labyrinthine montage, the components lose their redundant, homogenizing, fragmented identity. The schizophrenia and ambivalence of multiple meanings thrusts itself forward. The mental conditions are accelerated until they produce a new, unknown reality, without denying the contradictions of everyday normality. Like Godard, Koolhaas assembles new images by making a montage of material from everyday modern culture. He achieves a depth of focus that penetrates to the meaning of things and so opens up the way to their deeper meaning. We are confronted with the plausible world behind the banal programmes of the consumerist society. It is not seeing things as they are that matters, but the penetration, the getting in-between. The representation is unmasked and is displaced by a presentation that makes us act differently. The work invites, so to speak, the gaze to focus in between things. The programme components are redispersed in such a manner that they acquire a high level of "incommensurability".²² This arises because the accepted functions receive a detailing, a position within the whole, a form, that catches us on the wrong foot. We recognize the functions but not their representation. In

²⁰ Note also how Deleuze characterized Godard's work: "Multiplicity is never in the terms, whatever their number, nor in the set, or totality, of them. Multiplicity is precisely in the AND, which does not have the same nature as the elements or the sets. (...) The AND is neither the one nor the other, it is always between the two, it is the boundary, there is always a boundary, a vanishing trace or flow, only we don't see it, because it is scarcely visible. And yet it is along this vanishing trace that things happen, becomings are made, revolutions are sketched out." *Trois questions sur "Six fois deux"*, *Cahiers du Cinema*, nr. 271, 1976.

²¹ Benjamin Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography", October 30, 1984.

²² Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time*, New York, 1994. Term taken from the chapter "The Constraints of Postmodernism", in which Fredric Jameson discusses Rem Koolhaas.

the national library in Paris, for instance, the many rooms, the functions, the interior spaces are suspended in one huge, semi-transparent, rectangular box full of books, between which the public spaces float like organs of the human body. "In this block," Koolhaas notes, "the major public spaces are defined as absences of building, voids carved out of the information solid. Floating in memory, they are like multiple embryos, each with their own technological placenta". Practically all the traditional codes of architecture are exploded. There results a series of fields, intersecting patterns and movements that refer to the simultaneous movements of a neural network. The building is like a large city of books through and between which the *flâneur* can saunter. It is as though it were a *dérive* of the Situationists. Koolhaas manoeuvres between indefiniteness and specificity in search of public spaces that are a retroactive manifesto of our times à la Delirious Manhattan, and in which the present urban culture, with its "dirty realism"²³, gives way to a different reality. Car parks, airports, the car, the periphery and "ugly" or incomplete material is deployed in order to uncover reality.

Godard and Koolhaas assemble images into a filmic narrative that aims to demonstrate another plausible world behind the everyday reality. This plausible reality is despite, or thanks to, its visual dimension not an illusion but a challenge to see the world differently. The next question we might ask ourselves is, what story does the plausible reality aim to tell? What radical immanent criticism does it imply? Evidently Koolhaas is interested in the recognition of new collective dimensions of our mass culture. From the point of view of method and interest, his work betrays a latent longing for an unfinished modern project.

The Pulp Fictions of Tarantino and Koolhaas

To what extent does Tarantino enable us to read reality more perceptively? In *Pulp Fiction*, it is no so much the filmic montage of sound and image, but the *mise en scène* that induces us to comprehend everyday reality as a 'dirty realism'. The film is set in the city periphery. It is a pulp move with an architecture without architects. It tells strange stories that come across as completely realistic. It is a form of ironic realism, witty and remarkable. It is a fiction "of a different scope", writes Bill Buford about the new American short story, "devoted to the local details, the nuances, the little disturbances in language and gesture - and it is entirely appropriate that its primary form is the short story (...). But these stories are strange stories: unadorned, unfurnished, low-rent tragedies about people who watch day-time television, read cheap romances or listen to country and western music. They are waitresses in roadside cafés, cashiers in supermarkets, construction workers, secretaries and unemployed cowboys. They play bingo, eat cheeseburgers, hunt deer and stay in cheap hotels. They drink a lot and are often in trouble; for stealing a car, breaking a window, pickpocketing a wallet. (...) mainly, they could just about be from anywhere: drifters in a world cluttered with junk food and the oppressive details of modern consumerism."²⁴ Tarantino naturally lays on this homelessness of the modern thickly in *Pulp Fiction* by confronting a bunch of professional killers with the excrescences of their own violent culture.

In the same way as Tarantino, Koolhaas uses the visual culture of pulp. The non-space. The space that we often are in, but do not consciously experience. Koolhaas and Tarantino make this condition explicit by incorporating it into their vernacular discourse. Tarantino and Koolhaas both make use of quotation. They cut many different

²³ Term from Bill Budford's Introduction to "New American Writing." *Granta*, no. 8, 1983. On the basis of this notion, Liane Lefaivre distinguished the same "Dirty Realism" in architecture; *Dirty Realism in European Architecture Today*, *Design Book Review*, no. 17, 1989.

²⁴ Bill Budford: Introduction to "New American Writing." *Granta*, no. 8, 1983

film genres together. Their works are accumulations of short stories. They make use of all kinds of genres in both official and non-design architecture. This produces an ironic, happy realism that can be deployed on a wide scale. Mass audiences and future projects are guaranteed. What I find problematical is that Tarantino's quoting is fettered by conventional morality. It is a form of self-censorship, which in *Pulp Fiction* can be summed up by the phrase "crime doesn't pay". Koolhaas uses dirty realism just like Tarantino, and is sometimes violent in the way he maliciously cuts elements of realism together. I think the enormous danger with Koolhaas is that the mix of genres, meant to dispute the (stylistic) language of architecture, can easily find itself caught up in a critical loop. This is something that certainly happens with Tarantino. *Pulp Fiction* is, after all, incapable of casting doubt on reality and, unlike Godard, can never expose a plausible, different and better reality behind reality. We could accuse Tarantino of narcotic reflexivity. He does not provoke an open dialogue that breaks through the representation.

Godard inspires an intellectualistic radical immanent criticism and Tarantino stands for a populist radical immanent criticism inherent to the film genres and the banal reality. Koolhaas, like Tarantino, makes use of quotations, irony and urban violence. Tarantino handles dirty realism with somewhat greater nonchalance. Koolhaas has so far prevented his work from becoming no more than a light-footed update of *Learning from Las Vegas*. His abstract modernist interventions sometimes move in the direction of the plausible alternative reality that Godard tries to achieve in his films, but if he were to become over-obsessed with the Bigness idea²⁵, the Tarantino-style nonchalance could easily take on grotesque forms.

Wild at heart

Even more than Tarantino, Lynch seems to pursue a kind of pyrotechnics. That is, a form of sublimity that tries to escape every existing order. Lyotard elucidates this concept by referring to the experience of a child striking a match for the first time and being fascinated by the phenomenology of fire. In contrast to an idea of motion that goes from point A to point B in accordance with a kind of logic, the child looks simply to see what happens. "The child likes the movement, the transition of colours, the flickering flame, the shine of the light, the death of the matchstick, the hissing. The child thus likes the sterile differences that serve no purpose. (...) The child enjoys the loss, what a physicist would call the discharge of energy." Apart from fire literally being a recurrent metaphor in *Wild at Heart*, Lynch seems to be continually trying to take dirty realism to such an extreme that its sublimity becomes palpable. Neither the sublimity of the veil, nor whatever is behind the veil, but the idea of being veiled is primary. There is no mimesis but an eclectic parodying of all styles. I detect a similar postmodern idea of beauty, of intense simulacra, in Koolhaas. For example, indoor car parks are inflated ad infinitum ('bigness' again). Visibility and violence become extensions of each other and lead to a new, sublime beauty. De Putter had good reason to describe Lynch's film *Wild at Heart* as an "excessive cinema"²⁶ where visibility does not lead, according to De Putter, to a step into the 'totally other' (as aesthetic experience) but only to more of the same, to an excessive use of the known. This methodology, too, seems to fascinate Koolhaas.

²⁵ Rem Koolhaas et. al. in : *Urbanism versus Architecture*, Any Magazine, New York, 1994, no. 9.

²⁶ Jos de Putter: *Spelen met vuur. De pyrotechniek van David Lynch* ['Playing with fire. The pyrotechnics of David Lynch'], *Skrien*, Dec./Jan. 1990/91, no. 175.

The problem of making architecture politically

If we examine Koolhaas's work from the viewpoint of Tarantino or Lynch, we can see the dangers associated with an approach that revels in the grotesque excrescences of dirty realism. Tarantino and Lynch do their best not to impede themselves with their own judgement. They are concerned with making creative use of the phase that precedes actual judgement, that is to them a mixture of consciously and unconsciously discovered elements from the discourse of film. However conceptually they perhaps play with the banal connotations of modern daily urban life, they ultimately aestheticize the found banality. They accelerate the contemporary condition with a cheerful peal of laughter. The deeper, invisible forces are not recognized. A plausible other reality proves to be merely illusion. It is a form of surrealism that is mesmerized by our culture of spectacle.

This is the world of the Nix Generation,²⁷ the generation that lives from moment to moment in a cosmic, pluralistic emptiness. "We eat. We drink. We talk. That is all." one of its spokespersons said. The Nix Generation is always trying to find a way to experience something authentic for a change. "They experience no impressive states of mind," Antil Ramdas observed about this generation, "they see no important goals and love is for them no longer a romantic ideal: it's OK without love, too. They go in search of ever stronger stimuli that bring them into marginal territories: perverse sexuality, hate, aggression, self-chastisement, gallows humour. Excesses and self-indulgence form the rare peaks in their life, and beyond that all is laziness, inertia, apathy and that overpowering boredom."²⁸ Tarantino and Lynch bring this momentism to great heights in an artistic, refined way. Their narratives are individual monologues filled with passion and violence but which sidestep any political issues. Indeed, just as the Nix Generation, they go in search of the authentic moment of the super-now. But naturally they can not escape the moral issues. And thus I arrive, by the back door, at the political issue. Godard rightly observes that "The problem is not to make a political film, but to make a film politically." And that, in my view, is where the crux of the matter lies. I agree with Chantal Mouffe that the political dimension is precisely the dimension of antagonism, which is always present in social life and can take countless different forms. The strategies of Tarantino, Lynch and Koolhaas are interesting cases to study within the framework of this notion, but whether they are also 'political', whether they initiate actions in thought and reality that go beyond the pluralistic, confusing realities, is something we may well ask ourselves. Shakespeare, Brecht, James Joyce, Flaubert, Beckett, Heiner Müller, Godard, Peter Sellars and many other theatre, opera and film makers have long worked in this tradition and have all proved capable of avoiding the trap of aestheticized antagonism. Koolhaas is one of the few architects who charges with measured vandalism through the china shop of architectural conventions to create an architecture worthy of a place in this venerable cinematographic and theatrical tradition. More so than film, such architecture runs a precarious course. Before you realize it, architecture becomes nothing more than a mirror of its times. Making a mirror is itself not all that simple, but it is also necessary to investigate the reflection, both in and out of immediate view; and this is a complicated task because architecture is more than criticism alone. It was not for nothing that the International Situationists of 1968 proclaimed "Be realistic: demand the impossible." By this they meant a transformation of everyday life - a transformation that in reality never stops and calls for continual revision. It is a radical immanent critique that tries to probe everyday life with actions shot through individuality, community and playfulness.

²⁷ Rob van Erkelens, Ronald Giphart, spokesmen for the Nix Generation, Groene Amsterdammer, 1994.

²⁸ Antil Ramdas, NRC Handelsblad: De generatie levensecht ['The Generation true to life'], Sat. 7 Oct. 1995.

Footnotes:

- 1 The term is taken from the theory of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe: Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politic, London, 1985. Chantal Mouffe, The Return of the Political, London, 1993.
- 2 The work of e.g. Nouvel and Tschumi is strongly inspired by film culture.
- 3 Since the nineteenth century, film has provided an excellent medium for investigating modernism in respect of technique and theory. Simultaneously with the development of film, we became conscious of motion in space and time in philosophy, art and architecture. See e.g. Anthony Vidler, The Explosion of Space: Architecture and the Filmic Imaginary, Assemblage 21, 1993.
- 4 See: Robert Stam: Reflexivity in Film and Architecture, From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc-Godard, New York, Columbia University Press, 1985.
- 5 The architect Robert Mallet-Stevens observed in 1925 that "... it is undeniable that the cinema has a marked influence on modern architecture; in turn, modern architecture brings its artistic side to the cinema.... Modern architecture not only serves the cinematographic set [décor]. but imprints its stamp on the staging [mise-en-scène], it breaks out of its frame; architecture 'plays.'" And for film makers who trained as architects (e.g. Lang, Kracauer, Eisenstein), film naturally has the potential to develop a new architecture of space and time, unfettered by the constraints of gravity and everyday reality.
- 6 See also Wim Wenders: The Act of Seeing, "Find myself a city to live in...", Verlag der Autoren, 1992. Wim Wenders in conversation with architect Hans Kollhoff. "Das Verbindendste [between architecture and film], kommt mir vor, ist, daß beide Künste viel mit Geld und trotzdem direkt mit der Frage zu tun haben, die die Leute am meisten angeht, nämlich >> Wie soll man leben?<< Im Kino wird die Frage auf eine andere Art beantwortet als in der Architektur. Die Architektur stellt die Frage natürlich viel konkreter, viel langfristiger. Im Gebauten soll man dann wirklich leben, im Kino werden nur Fragen gestellt oder hin un wieder auf die eine oder andere Weise beantwortet - während die Architektur immer die Frage und Antwort in einem ist und eventuell dann eine Antwort, die heißt <lebenslang>. Das ist halt Gott sie Dank im Kino nicht der Fall, da kann man auch rausgehen, wenn man will. (...) Also man lebt natürlich mit der Architektur ganz anders als mit dem Film und trotzdem stellen beide dieselbe frage, >>Wie soll man leben<< Bevor man einem film macht oder bevor man einde Stadt ändert, ist die Fragestellung die gleiche."
- 7 Walter Benjamin cited in Anthony Vidler, The explosion of Space: Architecture and the Filmic Imaginary, Assemblage 21, 1993.
- 8 Edward W. Said, Representations of the Intellectual, The 1993 Reith Lectures, London, Vintage, 1994
- 9 See also Homi K. Bhabha in: The Location of Culture, London, 1994. "What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These "in-between" spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood - singular or communal - that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaborations, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself."
- 10 Of course I am not referring here to an attitude such as that recently expressed by Philip Johnson: "In architecture, you have to know what ground you stand on, and with me it's always shifting." Phillip Johnson, 9/27/95, Architecture On Line, Princeton WWW magazine, Quote of the Month.
- 11 Scott Lash, Difference or Sociality?, Lecture for conference The Theory of the Image, Van Eyck Academy, Maastricht, 1995
- 12 See also: The Invisible in Architecture, Ole Bouman, Roemer van Toorn, London, 1994
- 13 Gilles Deleuze: Het denken in plooiën geschikt ['Thought arranged in folds'], Kampen 1992. Translated from the French: Pourparlers: 1972-1990, Paris, 1990.
- 14 Reflexivity in Film and Architecture, From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc-Godard, New York, Columbia University Press, 1985; Roemer van Toorn: Archaism, Fascinism, Reflexivity. Three strategies of resistance, European catalogue, Paris, 1994.
- 15 The concept of simultaneity was discussed extensively by Edward W. Soja in Postmodern Geographies, The reassertion of space in critical social theory, London, 1989.
- 16 See e.g. Scott Lash & John Urry: Economies of Signs & Space, London, 1994. Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, Scott Lash; Reflexive Modernization, Politics, tradition and aesthetics in the modern social order, Oxford, 1994.
- 17 Sergei Eisenstein. Montage Het constructie principe in de kunst ["The Construction Principle in Art"], Sunschrift 175, Nijmegen, 1981.
- 18 André Bazin, Qu'est-ce que le cinéma, Paris, 1975.
- 19 Jean-Paul Fargier, "La face cachée de la lune" in: Art Press: Spécial Godard, no. 4 (1984-1985)
- 20 Note also how Deleuze characterized Godard's work: "Multiplicity is never in the terms, whatever their number, nor in the set, or totality, of them. Multiplicity is precisely in the AND, which does not have the same nature as the elements or the sets. (...) The AND is neither the one nor the other, it is always between the two, it is the boundary, there is always a boundary, a vanishing trace or flow, only we don't see it, because it is scarcely visible. And yet it is along this vanishing trace that things happen, becomings are made, revolutions are sketched out." Trois questions sur "Six fois deux", Cahiers du Cinema, nr. 271, 1976.
- 21 Benjamin Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography", October 30, 1984.

Roemer van Toorn, Film + Arc 2 catalogue, Graz, 1993

- 22 Fredric Jamenson, *The Seeds of Time*, New York, 1994. Term taken from the chapter "The Constraints of Postmodernism", in which Fredric Jameson discusses Rem Koolhaas.
- 23 Term from Bill Buford's Introduction to "New American Writing." *Granta*, no. 8, 1983. On the basis of this notion, Liane Lefaivre distinguished the same "Dirty Realism" in architecture; *Dirty Realism in European Architecture Today*, *Design Book Review*, no. 17, 1989.
- 24 Bill Buford: Introduction to "New American Writing." *Granta*, no. 8, 1983
- 25 Rem Koolhaas et. al. in : *Urbanism versus Architecture*, *Any Magazine*, New York, 1994, no. 9.
- 26 Jos de Putter: *Spelen met vuur. De pyrotechniek van David Lynch* ['Playing with fire. The pyrotechnics of David Lynch'], *Skrien*, Dec./Jan. 1990/91, no. 175.
- 27 Rob van Erkelens, Ronald Giphart, spokesmen for the Nix Generation, *Groene Amsterdammer*, 1994.
- 28 Antil Ramdas, *NRC Handelsblad: De generatie levensecht* ['The Generation true to life'], Sat. 7 Oct. 1995.