

Project Vicissitudes. Private ironism and critique of ideologies

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Keywords: ironism, ideology,
deconstruction, discourse, project.

ABSTRACT

The virtual discredit of the modern notion of “project” as a rational achievement of an emancipatory political telos emerges as a counterface of the persistent reduction of the project exercise to the significant plan of representation resources, an aspect that is possible to recognize, symmetrically, in the particular way of exercising the typical postmodern theoretical reflexion. Thus, the emptying of the ends of the project after the preoccupation for the means seems to coincide with the apparent critical radicality of deconstructivist ironism that, having become today the common sense of the self-promotional writing of the “architect-entrepreneur”, has not done anything but exercise a strong discursive depoliticization of the discipline. Precisely, postmodern ironism as an “ideology” needs to be thought of and fought against from a field that recognizes itself as resistant to its influence, at the time of demanding, urgently, the repoliticization of the project notion by means of a critique of ideologies. Only the public vocation of the university would seem to have the necessary conditions for a new meaning of this nature, reclaiming the modernist inspiration of the architectural project.

The Postmodern Condition by J. F. Lyotard places us in what is, perhaps, one of the most crucial questions to understand the modern notion of project. The argument is well known. In order to displace the religious myth as a support of monarchic power, modern science finally had to resort to another mythology to justify itself: the meta-narrative of the project. The postmodern condition, on the contrary, would come to sum up the event for which contemporary science would no longer require this help at the time of justifying its operations. After the collapse of the emancipatory objectives of modern science encouraged by that mythology, the quest for truth or justice is no longer central. Abandoning the dictatorship of the telos, the contemporary research nourishes its legitimacy by means of the performative improvement of its procedures and methods, so that the criterion of efficiency of the means replaces the political and epistemological level of the ends (Lyotard, 2000). In this scenario, the beginning of the crisis of the idea of progress could not but entail, if not devalue, at least a transfiguration of the very idea of project, due to the prospective sense that both terms have in common.

Similarly, in architecture’s own theory we can find a displacement of the ends towards the means in the successive fall into discredit of the postulates of Modern Movement and, certainly, of its particular understanding of the project. Perhaps the most eloquent model of this

manifestation is exemplarily deposited in the founding essay of deconstructivism, Peter Eisenman’s “The End of the Classical”. According to him, the death of representation would liberate architecture from the dictates of the ends held by the Modern Movement and, consequently, of its conception of the project subordinated to the heteronomy of the social and the political. In fact, for Eisenman, a truly autonomous architecture will have to be ruled by immanent principles, concentrating all the research efforts no longer on its submission to some extra-disciplinary commitment of an ethical-emancipatory order, but on the project’s own resources and methods. This emphasis on the processal-methodological affects the project notion itself in such a way that, far from associating itself to the modern idea of transcendence regarding the weight of facticity, it becomes, inversely, into the privileged signifier to hold the demand – and the promise – of disciplinary autonomy⁽¹⁾ (Eisenman, 1994).

This is clearly manifested in the seductive tendency to reduce architecture theory to a project or design theory, in fact, to the poetics of architecture obsessed to delirium with research of new strategies of architectural design, recording and notation. This phenomenon is transversally endorsed to the whole scene that some call international new avant-garde (Puebla Pons, 2002).

Having become common sense nowadays, the deconstructivist fascination for the

signifier is not only circumscribed to the level of visual practices, but it has also managed to hegemonize a set of textual devices with which it intends to expand its position and, at the same time, its new version of the project. If Classicism, in its moment, resorted to the order of the architecture treaty and the Modern Movement appealed to the manifest and to historiography, the neoavant-garde uses primarily author interviews and essays in order to promote itself. The statute of the latter – and whose canon is doubtless Eisenman's text cited above – might perhaps be defined under what Richard Rorty defines as "irony", understanding by this the rhetoric strategy distinctive of postmodern intellectual discourse (Rorty, 1989).

Regarding legitimation, Rorty establishes two basic types of position facing what he calls "ultimate lexicon", understood as that discourse which we inevitably and implicitly refer to in our arguments, and which is not transcended by any other. In sum, it should be what Lyotard calls "meta-narrative". These two types of positioning give origin, in turn, to two intellectual figures which are the metaphysician and the ironist (Rorty, 1989).

On the one hand, the metaphysician would be the one who asserts, against all odds, the existence of a fundamental and transcendent repertoire, more adjusted to reality than any other narrative and which we are all fatally subject to. Besides, he believes that it is possible to determine systematically the terms that compose it and derive from them the criteria that allow discerning what is correct from what is incorrect, in addition to setting up a hierarchy, under its administration, for

all the rest of "minor" languages. In short, this privileged meta-discourse would be philosophy. (Rorty, 1989)

Unlike the previous figure, the ironist thinks that the ultimate lexicon he adscribes to is always provisional, admitting its plausibility only for reasons of effectiveness; on the contrary, he is ready to abandon it for one of greater argumental suitability. Renouncing the belief of being fairer to reality, he warns that no thesis formulated from its narrative shall eliminate its provisional character. In this sense, the ironist assumes the impossibility of transcending his own lexicon given the historically prefigured character of all discourse. Therefore, and as the main holder of such aspiration, philosophy can never be appreciated as superior to literature or science, without exercising a certain symbolic violence against them (Rorty, 1989).

These two intellectual positions, in turn, specify different strategies when doing the argumentative exercise. While on the one hand, the metaphysician legitimizes his sayings on an apparent access to a last narrative, the ironist, on the other, does it without resorting to the meta-narrative basis, but through the "redescription" of the ultimate lexicons of his opponents. In this reading of the reasoning of the others, the ironist inaugurates performatively a territory where his position appears as the most lucid regarding his adversaries. He manages to defeat them when staging his strengths and weaknesses, at the very moment in which he assumes the capacity to envisage what they are not capable of noticing themselves. Consequently, Rorty identifies the

ironist's intention as alien to all public aspiration centered on truth or justice – typical modes of an ultimate basis of an erudite tone – as in this case it would be rather a private motivation: to win the game at the same time of elaborating its own image. The discursive strength of the ironist does not lie on the ethical or epistemological virtue of his reasoning, but on the capacity of persuasion obtained thanks to the redescriptive strength that he moves against his opponents⁽²⁾ (Rorty, 1989).

This would have two fundamental political consequences. In the first place, it consolidates liberalism as the only true democratic virtue, due to the definite establishment of sophism as a way of argumental legitimization and, in the second place, it discourages any progressivism, since appealing to an ultimate lexicon of higher historical superiority capable of "liberating" us from a supposed ideological opacity of argumentations no longer seems necessary nor desirable.

So, we can say that the type of discursive order exercised by Eisenman – and by a long lineage of postmodern theoreticians-architects who repeat this same process ad nauseam – is fundamentally ironist. In fact, Eisenman takes responsibility for redescribing all Western architecture until nowadays as an inexcusable and unnoticed militancy in the classical order, addicted to the logics of representation. Thus, he discards all the preceding rhetorical uses. First, the intention of the treaty: he criticizes harshly the classical and metaphysical adscription to all Western architecture; then, says the same about the intention of historiography: he

redescribes historically the way in which representation has become dominating even in the Modern Movement itself and its conception of history; and, lastly, he dismantles the motivation of the manifesto: Eisenman's essay itself renounces being presented as a messianic declamation legitimized by some higher progressive virtue that is imperative to follow. By dissociating himself of all the previous textual devices, he assumes a position that he draws as "not-classical", placing himself out of the metaphysical, historiographical and avant-garde trap of the representational, demanding a "fictional" consideration of architecture⁽³⁾.

However, although Eisenman's discourse has a private intention – understanding that it allows placing it as a winner in front of not-classical reasoning – it holds a certain public interest: it calls contemporary architecture to concentrate on autonomy. Since this question cannot happen by an ultimate basis, it can only be achieved by persuasion or, in terms of the critique of ideologies, by "hegemony" (Laclau, 2002).

When dealing with cynical and post-ideological lucidity⁽⁴⁾, no contemporary discourse on architecture can intend being truer than other, without incurring in a legitimization by meta-narrative. It seems that the only alternative left is redescriptive persuasion which, however, does not precisely operate in an innocuous scenario where all the opponents are in the same conditions to argue and win. On the contrary, it takes place in a complex network of powers that disciplinary knowledge organizes and determines, from the beginning, the different positions of privilege and

subordination of the competitors. In other words, the conditions of discursive production are not the same nor are they distributed in a homogenous way within the wide architectural field. Regarding its power of persuasion, diffusion and prestige, the narrative elaborated by the professional architect in a private transnational office – like Eisenman's – is not the same as the discourse proposed by professors of a public Latin American university. It is evidently not the same due to what Lyotard himself indicates as one of the most characteristic effects of postmodern condition: the decay of university public discursivity before the increasing epistemological influence of private centers, companies and organizations (Lyotard, 2000).

What and who does Eisenman – and by extension, every private professional architect – write for then? For the ironist's self-promotion or for the strengthening of the discipline? It could be said that for both, but not by means of a bifid argument that establishes the disjunction between public and private in a balanced way, since if you do not want to be an anachronistic metaphysician, the ironist's intention must necessarily prevail ultimately.

It is here where we can envisage the rhetorical texture of the professional architect that makes "theory" regarding the interests that inevitably move his speech. Such texture is, actually, the postmodern legitimacy, that is, the one that takes place by performative circularity: on the one hand, Eisenman certifies his discourse as the brand of a renowned international project company and, on the other hand, discourse legitimizes Eisenman as he

persuades the academic community to agree with his arguments. It is at this precise performative connection that the asymmetric coupling between private and public is produced and, with it, the possibility of a slow replacement of the modern concept of project by its postmodern, ironist and immanent version.

In the first place, it should be said that the disciplinary-theoretical discourse of the private professional is directly addressed to the investor that might, eventually, finance his work. The latter is not interested, nor is he in a situation to embrace it, because of the entrepreneurial world's own epistemic impression⁽⁵⁾.


On the contrary, this is rather addressed – thematically and rhetorically – to the academic world the professional often belongs to and, sometimes, leads. This is where the listening conditions required for its reception are set and where there is a teaching staff ready to discuss his postulates and spread them when training students. This academic diffusion effect would be more prompt to be displayed by those teachers more linked to the private practice of the profession, not only because they are in tune with such narratives because of the similar intermediate position they would hold between private and public⁽⁶⁾. It also happens because they see as natural the reduction of the "theoretical" to the practical project exercise, to the extent that they are inevitable influenced by the pragmatic view that the professional practice inevitably provides them with. This particular link between the private practice of the profession and teaching is undoubtedly favourable so that the deconstructivist *sensus communis* of

the project notion – in conjunction with the ironist discursivity of “entrepreneur-architect” – finally manages to install and naturalize itself successfully inside the academia. Thus, the prestige that the teaching peers finally grant the private architect can certainly have a considerable interest for the investor, above all in a global economy where symbolic capital is acquiring increasing relevance. In this context, there are many incentives for the illustrated, prospective and political conception of the project to be replaced by an aesthetic and depoliticized version, although covered with all the flashy decorations of the university institution for the entrepreneurial self-promotion of architecture.

In conclusion, and alarmingly, the university may become the public certification field of private discourse. An autonomist understanding of the project as the one hegemonized by deconstructivism, functional to professional ironist, has finally been able to become universal thanks to a pedagogical process that allows concealing its private interest.

To sustain acritically this modern project version, intoxicated by the unilateral fascination for the universe of the signifiers, unlike what Eisenman would state, would be to assume the maximum instance of ideological submission: in a world without meta-narratives where the ends have disappeared, only the naked praxis of the profession is left. But on the plain of post-ideological pragmatism it would not seem possible to notice the political, historical or epistemological context where such a reduction and universalization of the project concept

has occurred because, precisely in such circumstances projecting cannot be thought of but from its own immanent principles. All other estimation that violates or transcends its procedural autonomy would be classed as “metaphysical”, “modernist” or “classical”.

In these terms, the conquest of disciplinary autonomy through postmodern project contraction to the limits of design would be inversely proportional to the defeat of critical university thinking. This paradox of triumph and failure will inevitably be the tragic result that ironism shall have when it intends reaching its maximum consequence and effectiveness. In fact, its greatest success would be to be capable of redescribing itself, before others can see its contradictions, but the price of that lucidity is certainly an immobilizing autodissolution: as Eagleton warns us, in a radical deconstructivist exercise “the winner is the first to get rid of all his cards and is left empty handed” (Eagleton, 1988, p. 178). 

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NOTES

(1) It would be a complete simplism to conceive autonomy as a systematic dismissal of the exteriority of what, supposedly, involves what we authentically own. Furthermore, in the case of Eisenman, for example, it would be a contradiction considering its evident post-structuralist influence. The issue does not consist in cutting ties with the outside and ignore possible foreign contributions, but rather the opposite: to functionalize extra-disciplinary resources towards strengthening and consolidating autonomy. Beyond its critical intentions and the multiple questioning and complaints about its immobilizing effects, philosophical deconstructivism has been, for neoliberal dogmatism, an excellent neutralizing antidote of the political aspirations that the Modern Movement tried to identify with architectural discipline itself, because it considered them heteronomous to the profession. The postmodern feeling operating behind this supposed autonomist defense assumes a strong critical attitude against any eidetic dimension because it identifies it with a “metaphysical” position. However, in practice, this attitude has resulted extremely conservative, as it discourages all prefiguration of an alternative that might orientate a possible radical political transformation. Undoubtedly, the bet for a non-metaphysical rehabilitation of the notion of idea developed by Alain Badiou might be very beneficial to replace this possibility.

(2) In the same way that architecture neoavant-garde privileges significant planning, we could also describe the ironist’s discourse as something essentially aesthetic. For Kant, in the judgment of taste, reason “produces” the universal for the purpose of subsuming the phenomenon to its rule. This productive character is, precisely, what separates it from the determining judgment: in the latter, the universal – or concept – is forcibly a priori. Thus, the meta-narrative would have to be located next to the non-conceptual universal that operates in the judgment of taste. In this one, universality can never be frozen into one figure only, but rather open to the “free game” of the faculties of knowledge. In particular and following the analogy, in the realm of the ironist’s arguments, that free game would not be anything but the ingenuity of redescription. Cf. Kant, trans. in 1993.

(3) On these terms, and as an example, it should be said that, unlike the postmodernists, Le Corbusier and Borchers never wrote essays: they were totally convinced – each one in his own way – that through their writings they expressed something immensely superior to the contingent fact of their respective individual existences, whether it was the universal-mathematical *soma* of the *Modulor* or “*Lo Plástico*” (“The plastic”). On the contrary, and at a distance from a subsidiary representational role to some transcendental idea, the fiction character and not the “representation” of not-classical architecture is precisely what takes Eisenman to privilege the signifiers over the signified, in sum, the means over the ends. This is, certainly, the key for a whole new notion of projectuality, one that tends to recognize its authentic domicile only and mainly in the problems of design.

(4) As it is well known, the traditional Marxist definition of the concept of ideology can be reduced to the formula “they do not know it, but they do it”. As Sloterdijk states, in a world where we are increasingly more aware of the inevitable mediated character of reality, the possibility of being submitted by the lack of awareness is quite restricted. For a praxis in which the subjects would no longer be oriented by any illusion, Sloterdijk reserves the concept of “cynical consciousness” that, in our terms, would be the position of the ironist. Paraphrasing the old Marxist definition mentioned above, which adjusts itself more fully to our post-ideological era, it can be resumed in the axiom “they know what they do and they do it” (Sloterdijk, 2007). Nevertheless, there is a third alternative that modifies the previous motto, replacing the ideological condition of its own cynical attitude. In fact, it is the one that Zizek proposes and that questions the seeming lucidity of the ironist, precisely, for ideological: “What they do not know is that their social reality, their activity, is guided by an illusion, by a fetishist inversion (...) they know very well how things are, but even so, they do as if they did not” (Zizek, 2009, p. 61).

(5) In this sense, the State funds work not for the rhetoric of the architects but for the efficiency that the project might provide for the fulfillment of its interests although the symbolic weight of the authorial prestige might be, in this case, very attractive to increase national pride.

(6) The university’s public character lies on the unconditional nature of the discursive space that characterizes it. In fact, without this quality it cannot enjoy such status. It seems nowadays extremely simple and imprudent to identify public with State, above all taking into consideration the role that the State begins to play in the promotion of what is private under the neoliberal order. Likewise, in order to maintain its modern sense it is not enough to demand from the national government more resources for the university; it is also necessary, and urgent, to deprivatize its discursive space and promote its autonomy. Cf. Derrida, 2010.

Architecture, playing and vanishing

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Keywords: Vanishing, poetic acts,
phalène, Escuela de Valparaíso.

“How do you know life? We think that as we see it through space, going around the city. It is not known inside the classroom.”

Alberto Cruz, Improvisación, 1959

ABSTRACT

In this essay I will focus on an exceptional group of architects and poets who have explored vanishing as a form of action, by means of grandiloquent geo-poetic expeditions through more or less vast American territories, for over sixty years. I will try to imagine the formulation of an aesthetics of invisibility in which active vanishing⁽¹⁾ operates like an emancipatory practice as a ludic proposal that challenges real sociopolitical and economic hierarchies and promotes new horizons for collective living. Even though when referring to the Escuela de Valparaíso, it might be more appropriate to think in terms not of aesthetics, but of poetics – in the sense of poiesis – whose radicality is in its concept of an architecture of living together, based on opening, risking

This is an edited and summarized version of the article ‘Tactics of Invisibility’ published in the magazine *Marcelina* n.º 6, 2010, pages 42-61.

and daring to expose one another, sometimes even to the extreme of vanishing.

ARCHITECTURE AND THE POETRY OF ACTION

In the middle of the last century, there was a rumor going around in reduced circles: there was a small group of poets, who were architects, for whom architecture consisted in the very experience of going around the city. One of the most visible members of this group of architect-poets of action was Alberto Cruz, then a young professor who became known at the beginning of the 1950s when he irritated a considerable number of parents of his architecture students at the Universidad Católica de Santiago, to whom he had communicated this idea that architecture was not learned in a classroom but knowing the city intimately. Alarmed, when they heard that a professor was encouraging their children to wander about the city and experience urban life, they demanded that the rector dismissed him. At that time, wandering about the city was done only by people who were poor and had a bad reputation, “people who are people”, a group to which architecture students then were supposed to belong, should visit (and not wander about) only the places delimited for that purpose. In spite of the scandal, in 1952 the polemical professor was invited to join the Universidad Católica de Valparaíso to relaunch the School of