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Jean-François Lyotard

Afterword: Dwelling, Mimesis, Culture

"Culture" is no longer an unambiguous coherent entity implying a clearly defined re-
lationship between present, past, and future. Assuming such an entity ever ex-
isted—a notion that is inherent in the term "tradition"—modernity introduced the
first fissure by breaking with the continuity with the past. "Auschwitz" is the name
of the second fissure indicating the broken relation with the future, for "Auschwitz"
means the violation of the promise of a new *Heimat* as the goal of modernity.

Already before the Shoah had been accomplished, Benjamin stated that there
is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism.[1]
This is true not only of the legacy of the past but also of the documents of today. Cul-
ture is not innocent and can in no way be innocent as long as it forms part of a social
constellation based on injustice and repression. Culture today is therefore marked by
tensions that are insoluble.

A reflection on dwelling leads one to the same conclusion. According to Heidegger—the philosopher who never faced up to "Auschwitz"[2]—dwelling stands for a relationship with the fourfold that has become impossible under modern conditions. For Adorno, however, it is clear that Heidegger's treatment of the question of dwelling is symptomatic of what is wrong with his philosophy. Heidegger attempts to reduce the idea of dwelling to an original essence, but this ontological approach disregards the question of concrete dwelling for concrete people and also ignores the banal but very real question of actual housing needs caused by social conditions. An approach like Heidegger's, in Adorno's view, is not capable of giving any impulse for change; rather, it implies an acceptance of historically determined conditions as if they were "eternally human": "No elevation of the concept of Man has any power in the face of his actual degradation into a bundle of functions. The only help lies in changing the conditions which brought the state of affairs to this point—conditions which uninterruptedly reproduce themselves on a larger scale."[3]

Adorno, who despite all his reservations never renounced the project of the Enlightenment, refers here to the dangers of an antimodern mode of thought that all too easily degenerates into a mythical invocation of the gods. For him philosophy always has to do with the struggle for social change in the sense of bringing about emancipation and liberation. Philosophical reflection must never be used to cover up social problems and abuses. Nevertheless, Adorno also is confronted with the problem that the world has become uninhabitable. For him this has everything to do with "Auschwitz." This name resonates with the despair that is provoked by the perversion of Enlightenment's rationality into the efficiency of the gas chambers. This reality is ineluctable and requires that modernity be rewritten.

In order to rewrite modernity, however, it is not sufficient to appeal to humanitarian values. Art, Adorno writes, can only be loyal to humanity through inhumanity toward it.[4] Humanism—the right-mindedness of those who think that all one needs to do to create the future is to appeal to the rationality and good will of everyone—is a totally inadequate foundation for projecting the future. The worn-out appeal to "human values" has proved incapable of averting the worst atrocities. The question should therefore be raised, according to Lyotard, whether the concept of humanism is not in fact the ideal camouflage for the actual inhumanity of the system. Should not another kind of thinking be offered in its place, a mode of thought that does not confine itself to rationality and good will? Lyotard points out that any human is inhabited by the inhuman: in the human person there is always something present of what he was before he developed into a person. Both sorts of inhumanity—the inhumanity of the system and that which inhabits the individual—can hardly be imagined by humanism. Both call for a thought that goes beyond good will, a thought that explores the abysses of culture. Lyotard invokes in this respect a mode of thought that is informed by the slowness of anamnesis and that is not in any hurry to attune everything to a well-ordered system by way of a hermeneutic or dialectic operation.[5]

Such anamnestic thought is tried out in his essay "Domus and the Megalopolis." Lyotard describes the condition of the *domus* as one that has now become impossible: dwelling as a commonplace where a desire to serve and a concern with the community are at work. This domestic community belongs to the past, for the human world has become a megalopolis. "From after the death of Virgil. From after the end of the houses. At the end of the Buddenbrooks." The prevailing system orchestrated by the exchange principle is not the least bit concerned with habit, narrative, or rhythm. Its memory is dominated by the principle of rationality that tramples tradition underfoot. The domus, however, concealed behind this system, does leave some trace of itself. This makes it a *fata morgana* for us, the impossible dwelling. Thought that attempts to resist incorporation by the megalopolis appears as the handwriting of these impossible dwellings: "Baudelaire, Benjamin, Adorno. How to inhabit the megalopolis? By bearing witness to the impossible work, by citing the lost domus. Only the quality of suffering counts as bearing witness. Including, of course, the suffering due to language. We inhabit the megalopolis only to the extent that we declare it uninhabitable. Otherwise we are just lodged there."[6] This impossible notion is for Lyotard what is at stake in thinking, in writing, and in works of art. It also forms, in my opinion, what is at stake in architecture. The Jewish Museum in Berlin is an example of the way in which architecture, "after Auschwitz," can rewrite the meaning of modernity. "Auschwitz" stands for the ultimate uninhabitability of modernity. The impossibility of dwelling, the bankruptcy of modernity's promise of a new *Heimat* is given architectonic form in the cold and gloomy depths of Libeskind's voids. Out of the intertwining of the two lines and the play of space, light, and texture, something else appears: what is involved here is not only despair and mourning; it is also hope for the future that can take shape only through a lucid grasp of the hopelessness of the present. It is here that Libeskind's critical reworking of the legacy of the Enlightenment lies. Rewriting modernity means a face-to-face confrontation with its failures and perversities; an anamnesis of the past is the precondition for taking any step into the future.

Koolhaas is less urgently concerned with reworking the past. Even so, the mimetic strategy of the Sea Terminal provides us with a work that in its "inevitable transformation into a cultural commodity" is witness to "the impossibility of the work," as Lyotard would have it.[7] This project refuses to choose between a banal commercial logic and the aspirations of art. Both are at issue here, both are equally valid. They are inseparably entwined, without being totally fused. It is precisely in the chasm between them that the "margin" exists that forms the tension of the design. In the intertwining of complicity with the system and opposition to the leveling tendencies inherent in it, the project of rewriting modernity is given form.

"To inhabit the megalopolis by declaring it uninhabitable." This is a way of rewriting Benjamin's formula in which he calls for a new sort of dwelling, a dwelling that is appropriate to the "hurried actuality" of the present. In addition to the age-old sense of security and seclusion, dwelling takes on a new level of meaning that has

to do with porosity and transparency, with adaptability and flexibility. Seen as a transitive verb, dwelling takes on a more active meaning of making an environment for itself and making oneself at home all over again. "Dwelling" has to do with "enclosing oneself," but in the modern condition this calls for a gesture that is continually renewed. Dwelling means the permanent quest for an ever-new enclosure, because no dwelling can be more than momentary at present: dwelling is continually permeated by its opposite. Dwelling thus understood stands as well for the pastoral image of the *Heimat* where one belongs, and for the transitoriness that in a modern condition inevitably marks this belonging.

The mimetic gesture of "enclosing oneself" is parallel to the quest for identity and self-realization that forms a basic characteristic of modernity. Modernity has to be continually redefined and rewritten in the light of the contradictions and dissonances that are inherent to it. In the same way dwelling is neither simple nor static, but has to be permanently appropriated anew. That means that modernity and dwelling are not to be considered as polar opposites, as is suggested by authors such as Heidegger or Norberg-Schulz. By investigating the multifarious layers and ambivalencies of both these concepts, I hope to have made it clear that modernity and dwelling are interrelated in complex ways. If architecture indeed should see it as its task to come to terms with the experience of modernity and with the desire for dwelling, the first thing to pay attention to is the intricate intertwining that exists between both of these.

It is not without reason that dwelling is the key metaphor that Freud uses in his reflection on the uncanny.[8] According to Freud, the most uncanny experience occurs in the environment that is most familiar to us, for the experience of the uncanny has to do with the intertwining of *heimlich* (what is of the house, but also what is hidden) and *unheimlich* (what is not of the house, what is therefore in a strange way unconcealed yet concealed). Freud makes plausible, in fact, that the uncanny is so frightening because it refers to what is one's "own" but nevertheless must remain hidden. Thus it has to do with that which is repressed. This implies that the figure of repression belongs to dwelling as its other that can neither be completely abandoned nor completely recovered.

Through mimesis and the small shifts and distortions that it generates, architecture is capable of making us feel something of that which is repressed, that which exists beyond the normal and expected. In this way architecture can serve as a guide to this permanent quest for dwelling, not by embodying dwelling in any direct sense—as some Heideggerians might have it[9]—but rather by framing it in modernity. This framing has, more than anything else, to do with the way architecture is offering a context for everyday life. This understanding is for me one of the most significant (if often neglected) contribution of the avant-garde impulse in architecture: that architecture is not just a highbrow discipline that occasionally informs the putting up of prestigious buildings, but that its ambition basically should have to do with the framing of everyday environments.

One thus should accept it as a given that architecture—in its most broadly conceived sense—forms the framework for life. But in accepting this as a starting point, one should also recognize that there can be something more. Providing comfort and convenience for daily life is not architecture's one and only goal—as Loos would have us believe. His judgment that architecture has nothing to do with art should not be taken for granted. The matter is a bit more complicated. Like art and literature, architecture *is* capable of suspending the continuity of the normal and generating a moment of intensity that subverts what is self-evident. Admittedly, what is specific to architecture is its link to everyday life, and this cannot so easily be brought into line with that which causes permanent unease. This, however, is where mimesis comes in. For mimesis makes it possible for a design project to be completely responsive to normal expectations, while at the same time offering something else. Mimesis complicates a transparent relationship between program, context, and form into multiple layers that do not allow for a one-way interpretation and that can conceal something disruptive behind a seemingly perfect fitting of everyday requirements. Thus, mimesis can bring about some experience of what is *unheimlich*, precisely by relying upon things that are proper and convenient.[10]

Mimesis can therefore operate most effectively in projects that are not immediately dissociated from their context and from public expectations, but that contain, as it were, a double entendre, which only gradually affects users and visitors. It is this double entendre, and the contradictions it implies, that make up for the complicated nature of beauty today.

One should indeed admit that the critical impact of an architectural project is not equivalent to its smoothly fitting into the international magazines. The way it interacts with its environment, the way in which it mimetically gives form to a critical dialogue with context and program, is much more determining in this respect. It seems to me, in any case, that Adorno's remark remains valid: "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."[11] Contradictory interpretations and opposing interests play an inevitable role in each architectural realization. The critical import of a design project can only be measured by the level to which it succeeds in mediating these contradictions through the mimetical shaping of the project, without, however, neutralizing their impact by simply neglecting or softening the tensions that exist between them.