

1993 Gillian Rose | Tower of Babel

Derrida interprets the Tower of Babel story as a 'defeat' for God.

Gillian Rose: 'Architecture to Philosophy – the Post-modern Complicity', 1993

[see 'Judaism and Modernity Philosophical Essays']

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To be a philosopher you need only three things. First, infinite intellectual eros: endless curiosity about everything. Second, the ability to pay attention: to be rapt by what is in front of you without seizing it yourself, the care of concentration – in the way you might look closely, without touching, at the green lacewing fly, overwintering silently on the kitchen wall. Third, acceptance of pathlessness (aporia): that there may be no solutions to questions, only the clarification of their statement. Eros, attention, acceptance."

– Gillian Rose: 'Paradiso', The Menard Press, 1999, p.42

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Eros | endless curiosity about everything

Attention | look closely, without touching

Acceptance | acceptance of pathlessness (aporia).

aporia: the inevitable gap that separates the universal from the particular, the ideal from the practical.

poetry (painting)...an in-between discipline, dwelling in the aporia, powerfully acknowledging and exploring the rifts that structure our existence: the gap between the powerful and the powerless, the City of God and the City of Man.

Rose demands that we work with this aporia rather than seek to resolve it. But what if the aporetic stance itself precludes formative work? The challenge that Rose has left us with, then, is to find a way of integrating the two phases of her authorship. It is not sufficient to recover the lost trajectory of her thought; we must also seek to complete it.

– Anthony Gorman: 'Gillian Rose and the project of a Critical Marxism', 2001

Rose believes that now-time can be, as it were, mobilized. That is to say, now-time does not enter into the world in a lightning flash; it is, rather, an *aporia*, continually reconfigured in time and history.

– Anthony Gorman: 'Gillian Rose's critique of violence', 2016

...'aporia' is prelogical, it refers to lack of way, and implies no exit from its condition."

– Gillian Rose: 'The Broken Middle'

...we work with this aporia [between universality and particularity] rather than seek to resolve it.

"If I am to stay alive, I am bound to continue to get love wrong, all the time, but not to cease wooing, for that is my life affair, love's work."

– Gillian Rose: 'Love's Work'

"...reason beyond the instrumental so that it may acknowledge the uncontainable, the aporia."

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As Reyner Banham argues in an article on the Lloyd's building, whether the new architecture understands itself as 'realizing modernism' for the first time, or as 'postmodern' it shares 'the compulsion to try and make sense of... human dilemmas' – even when the dilemma is perceived as aporia and not as ideal. It is this celebration of aporia which makes Lyotard's aesthetic of the 'sublime' comparable to self-styled 'anti-aesthetic' versions of post-modernism.

At the 1986 exhibition of New Architecture at the Royal Academy, the first architecture exhibition at that venue for forty years, half of the display was devoted to unbuilt, rejected or still undecided projects for restoring whole areas of London to pedestrians in the wake of the perceived destruction of social life by the values of modern architecture. Yet the only sociological concept used in the exhibition itself and in the scholarly catalogue is 'the creation of a public realm' – a phrase and concept which Habermas has taken over and developed from the work of Hannah Arendt. Architecture, social theory and philosophy seem to be complicit in exchanging each other's most undifferentiated and general concepts and theses.

In the scholarly symposium which accompanied an exhibition held in Berlin in 1984, 'The Adventure of Ideas – Architecture and Philosophy since the Industrial Revolution', may be found a German translation of a discussion between Jacques Derrida and Eva Meyer, 'Labyrinth und Archi/Textur', in which they discuss the Tower of Babel, post-modernism, architecture and philosophy. This discussion exemplifies how the three analogies between architecture and philosophy are employed.

Derrida interprets the Tower of Babel story as a 'defeat' for God. He argues that the attempt of a tribe to give themselves a name, 'the Semites', is the main event. The name 'Semite' means 'name' already, but the Semites want to 'make themselves a name' in order to colonize and dominate the other tribes and their languages from the place they intend to usurp in Heaven. God devastates this undertaking by uttering one word – 'Babel' – meaning confusion. The Semites plan of domination is nullified by the bestowal of a proper name and by the deconstructing of their architectural construction. Accordingly, universal language is terminated; henceforth the plurality of languages cannot be mastered, and there can be no universal translation: language becomes labyrinthine. It also means that there is no single architecture: architecture is also henceforth plural and labyrinthine in spite of its axonometric (die Axonometrie) grids of plan and elevation. The Tower of Babel story thus opposes architectural as well as linguistic difference to the unificatory ambition which has been vanquished. Derrida argues that reading the story in terms of this plurality is neither anthropocentric nor theocentric. The almightiness of God is undermined when He is forced to intervene and speak the word 'Babel': for 'Babel' means 'confusion' – but it only means that because of the confusion according to which the word 'Babel' sounds like the word for 'confusion' in Hebrew. God is equivocal: he commands and forbids translation of His Name and lapses into the same situation as those he opposes. He cannot dominate this situation which gives rise to the plenitude of architecture as well as the plenitude of language. Post-modernity, Derrida infers, takes off from this 'defeat and beginning'.

Derrida's thesis is here couched in the form of a classic Kantian transcendental argument:²⁸ 'It is the impossibility of the Tower of Babel which makes it possible for architecture like language to have a history.' This history is always to be understood (he claims and I emphasize) in relation to a divinity which is finite. Modernity, he continues, is the striving for absolute mastery or domination; post-modernity is the establishment or experience of the end of this plan and elevation for mastery and domination. Post-modernity, he concludes, is a new relation to the divine – not Greek, nor Christian, but the conditions (sic) for architectural thinking. This strange phraseology is another transcendental deduction with a metacritical twist. The 'conditions' for architectural thinking are the 'dwelling', the event of place – an idea which comes from Heidegger's famous essay 'Building Dwelling Thinking'. The 'event' of place is the precondition of architectural form: a communal relating of human beings to concrete, unmeasurable dwelling, not to abstract, measured, architectural planning. It is this delineation of the absolute event which Derrida offers as a new idea of our relation to God – and surely it amounts to a new humanism.

How is the account of the Tower of Babel developed above different from Derrida's? There are four main points: history, humanity, God, language and architecture. According to Derrida, the Tower of Babel story narrates the origin of the history of architecture and language. I argue that this reading opens and closes history at the same time: for its notion of history does not imply development. Derrida argues that the dichotomy of humanity as rebellious and God as sovereign and infinite is dissolved; all dichotomies – human/divine, nature/culture – are replaced by the idea of labyrinthine plurality. I argue that the dissolution of this opposition between human and divine, absolute and relative power, dissolves

potentiality too, and cancels the negotiating of the relation between potentiality and actuality through history. Similarly, Derrida's argument that God is defeated and becomes finite apparently offers instant release from the master/slave dichotomy and from humanity's desire for domination and mastery. I would argue, on the contrary, that it robs humanity of any experience whereby that trying of power may be acknowledged and cultured through a third. Derrida's position that history is 'always in relation to a finite divinity' is dogmatic in the precritical sense that it implies no dialectic of dependence and independence, no political or spiritual life. Derrida's argument that the plurality of language and of architecture is at stake legislates a current perception into a universal – employing and undermining universal explanation at the same time. The reading developed above expands architecture as the means, the third term, by which a community negotiates its relation to itself and to other communities. Where Derrida deals with dichotomies and their abolition, I propose the changing configuration of two in a third. Then the current experience is not frozen: it is seen as transitory but not as reduced and relative.

A return to the notion of the Tower may concretize this argument. The problem of its meaning may also be encountered in Rodin's 'Tower of Labour' and Tatlin's 'Tower', the Monument to the Third International. The importance of the Tower to the post-modern argument is that it is an exemplar of what Hegel in the Aesthetics calls 'Symbolic' architecture so as to distinguish it from 'Classical' and 'Romantic' architecture. Norbert Lynton captures Hegel's meaning when he explains Tatlin's Tower as an image of the forerunner, St John the Baptist who cannot deliver salvation but proclaims it is 'at hand', and calls us to repent.

Symbolic architecture is monumental, the dwelling place of god not of human beings, an external not an interior space; and it arises when meaning (absolute power) and configuration (form) remain ununified. The symbolic form of art or architecture does not present (Classical) nor re-present (Romantic) the absolute, but refers or points to it ambiguously, employing symbols which always also imply things other than the meaning for which they furnish the image. The Tower is analogous to the pointing finger of the Baptist in the Grünewald altarpiece, occupying a different kind of space from the crucified body of Christ.

According to Hegel the sublime is a special instance of the symbolic, 'an attempt to express the infinite without finding in the sphere of finite phenomena an object which proves adequate for this representation'. In this particular passage of Hegel is himself citing approval of Kant's distinction of the sublime from the beautiful. However, unlike the postmodern aesthetics for which this very proposition of Kant's cited by Hegel is also the key text, Hegel develops the proposition into a question: 'First the question arises about what character the world situation must have if it is to provide a ground on which a [sublime] event can be adequately presented.'³³ Hegel compares the 'unconscious' symbolism of Oriental and Jewish architecture with later 'conscious' literary symbolism, such as fable, parable, riddle and allegory. It is the unconscious obliquity of meaning and configuration which links the post-modern 'conscious' symbolism with the story and image of the Tower, and with monumental symbolic architecture and with the sublime in art generally.

Yet this is to take a development – a changing relation between form and configuration – and to freeze it. For in Hegel the symbolic may overlap with and change into the Classical and the Romantic and back again. Hegel criticizes – and his warning is peculiarly apposite:

the extension of symbolism to every sphere of mythology and art which is by no means what we have in mind here in considering the symbolic form of art. For our endeavour does not rise to finding out how far artistic configuration could be interpreted symbolically or allegorically in this sense of the word 'symbol'; instead we have to ask, conversely, how far the symbolic itself is to be reckoned an art-form. We want to establish the artistic relation between meaning and configuration insofar as that relation is symbolical in distinction from other modes of presentation, especially the classical and romantic.

The Romantic form of art also consists of a lack of unity between meaning and configuration, between the absolute or whole and its representation as form, its appearance in the sensuous medium or means, but the lack of unity is represented not referred to as in the symbolic. It is illusion (Schein) and this illusion is derived from a specific socio-historical experience in which spheres of life – religious and political, or law, language and labour – have become separated from each other.

To conclude this reference to Hegel and the paper in general five points may be drawn out. First, there may be more than one kind of divorce between meaning and configuration, whereas the post-modernism considered here with its focus on the 'sublime' or the abolition of recurrent dichotomy is only able to conceive of one. Therefore a dialectical approach is more open and plural than the modernism or post-modernism arguments themselves. Secondly, it is the form of that divorce or form itself in its specificity which can be seen to have historical presuppositions, not the divorce in its generality as in most versions of post-modernism. In this sense the means of law, language and labour have a changing fate. Third, these changes may be related chronologically and systematically without producing a metanarrative or a progressive teleological philosophy of history; it is not a question of employing discredited metanarratives

but of seeing narratives themselves as different kinds of form. In this sense genealogy may be found – in Hegel and Marx as well as in Nietzsche – within aporetic philosophy of history. Fourth, in Hegel and the dialectical tradition, the 'ending' of art has a different history from the 'ending' of religion and politics, and the end of art characterizes modernity. It is the modernist defence of an aesthetic realm and post-modernism's aesthetics of the sublime or anti-aesthetics which produce a uniform philosophy of history over all disciplines, not the dialectical approach.

Finally, on the view developed here, configuration is related to confrontation with absolute power and becomes an indicator of human potentiality which is constantly renegotiated. In the Tower of Babel story humanity achieves an initial measure or idea of its own potentialities by encountering its limit. That encounter does not arrest it in an endless 'labyrinth', but sets it off on further encounters where what has been learnt or not learnt is tried out again and again, constantly changing both the idea of the potential and the idea of the limit; these encounters cannot be assimilated to the meanings or 'signs' of the first one. This reading is different from pluralism, vernacularism, nominalism: it is not rationalistic nor is it the 'compulsion to make sense of human dilemmas'; it is the human dilemma being represented or referred to.

Paradoxically, the claim advanced formerly by modern and now by post-modern architecture and philosophy, that each alone offers a genuine 'opening' disowns previous openings – attempts to renegotiate potentiality and actuality³⁵ – by characterizing the other position without differentiation as 'total', 'closed', 'functionalist', 'rationalistic', 'dominatory', instead of drawing on the experience of those openings and their subsequent subversion, instead of comprehending illusion: the relation between the limit of the meaning at stake and its configuration or form. I conclude that the use of architecture in philosophy bolsters a tendency to replace the concept by the sublimity of the sign, which is, equally, to employ an unexamined conceptuality without the labour of the concept.

– Gillian Rose: 'Architecture to Philosophy – the Post-modern Complicity' / 'Judaism and Modernity Philosophical Essays', 1993

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formative work and summative work, and the complex relation between the two...

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