

The Organic Imagination

The prevailing model of the imagination, among those who still regard the imagination as a central idea in architecture theory and criticism, is the “material imagination,” a term originated from Gaston Bachelard and developed by Marco Frascari and others. While this formulation helped to define projects that were in tune with philosophy’s “material idealism,” it was easily reduced to a “crude” materialism of mechanical interactions and functions, defended by inserting magical elements within mute substances, a process that left “the magical” *per se* as remote and inexplicable as before.

The term “organic” is intended to embrace the magical *per se*, not as a permanently ineffable element but as the process by which, as *La vie en rose* says, turns everyday words into love songs. The organic imagination is about the imagination as an organ, understood as a material entity that manages relations between a hypothetical inside and hypothetical outside. I say “hypothetical” because, with the imagination, inside and outside are permanent but unstable elements within a language of boundaries which afford shelter while they allow passage. Like any organ, the aim is to preserve life, and in this the organic imagination resembles Freud’s “death drive,” a process aiming to sustain life in the face of death, not a drive toward death, although death, in the form of a gap or void, is a radical and permanent element.

By emphasizing the role of the organ and, specifically, the organ as an interface between an inside and outside, new options are opened up for what was traditionally regarded as the material imagination. These are listed below as itemized points, followed by brief commentaries.

§1. An organ is alive, and a part of living system, even a system that is at first constituted by mechanical artifacts; it is sexual in that sexuation is the condition of reproductive life, and the imagination is, if anything, concerned with reproduction while, at the same time, the aim is novelty.

The issue of sexuation ties organic imagination to the complex matter of gender differentiation, which in my theory is grounded within Lacan’s formation of the “not-all” of the feminine. While the condition for the masculine (“those who choose to call themselves men,” which was a flexible and dynamic function for Lacan) was that all were subject to the phallic law of (symbolic) castration, with only one exception; the feminine is never fully subject to the Symbolic, and there are no exceptions. This poses the question of the organic imagination within the more general project of the Lacanian Imaginary, one of the three constitutive elements of subjectivity (Imaginary, Symbolic, Real). It also means that a theory of the organic imagination constitutes a radical feminism.

§2. The organic imagination situates itself within the interval Lacan identified as “between the two deaths,” which I identify as primarily a “comic” condition in that the momentum that carries the dead subject past the moment of literal death is indistinguishable from the subject’s ability to “tarry with the negative,” i.e. sustain a continual “embarrassment” or ridiculous condition.¹ In this, the organic imagination identifies with the work of art in its existential condition as an “impossible object” marked by the presence of various acts of framing that separate it from “life” while giving it a kind of artificial but limited life-within-art, a model best described as a theater with its radical division between auditorium and stage, two zones that alternate in order for “the theatrical” to take place — i.e. the audience “plays dead” while the show goes on.

The Thesean labyrinth, traditional emblem of the condition of “between the two deaths,” identifies the primarily architectural nature of the organic imagination. This is not because the labyrinth is customarily cited as a primary invention in the history of (mythic) architecture, but because architecture and event are inseparable. The “event” of the organic imagination is also an “architecture,” involving form (and recursion), materiality (and the negative), and use (emphasizing the permanent element of failure). As a life-and-death matter, organic imagination chooses comedy over tragedy in that tragedy ordains a noble catastrophe while comedy is about rebirth and transformation. At the level of literally organic metaphor, this is the continual multiplication of sexual reproduction, serving as a model for the unlimited potentiality of the poetic. This is the condition of “polymorphic perversity,” related to art’s ability for “unlimited semiosis” — a liberation of signifying chains and discourse from circularity and finitude by means of “metalepsis,” a process of double reversal/negation that operates from inside the Symbolic. Thus, the second death of the organic imagination is not about an imagined apotheosis but, rather, a renunciation of any “exterior” to the work of art’s “interior” — a Hegelian moment of rejection of the idea of absolute/perfect knowledge, a consent to “tarry with the negative” of art’s interiority.

§3. Organicism and comedy are traditionally linked, in systems that thematize four potential approaches to cultural “formations” (for example, the “world hypotheses” of Stephen Pepper: Formalism, Functionalism, Organicism, and Contextualism). Organic imagination is not, however, a category or “option” among other options as in such meta-theoretical positions. Lacan: “There is no meta-language” — which, for Lacan, had an exception: the *père-version* of the “sinthome,” the need to *repair the broken links* between the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real. Organicism is this “repair job.” It is tied to the “sinthome,” the successor to the psychoanalytic “symptom.” The sinthome moves past the symptom in the symptom’s function as an externality of subjectivity’s defective condition. The sinthome converts the *jouissance* (pleasure principle) of psychoanalytic subjectivity into *j’ouï-sens*, a “I hear sense,” which is an “acousmatic” relationship to the True.

In Lacan’s theory of discourse, the True occupies an ambiguous position, as something that must first be “lost” in order to be, in the last stage “found,” all the while being something that “could not be lost

because it was never possessed in the first place." That is, Truth is that which exists through a retroactive process of realization of the negative. Its loss (the loss of "being," exchanged for "speaking" at the mirror stage) gives rise to discourse. The possibility of its recovery is a matter of the project of *j'ouï-sens*, which must be cast within the Imaginary rather than the Symbolic, as is the symptom. Recovery is the "repair job" that remains after psychoanalysis is over, it involves a "fourth ring" woven into the three rings of the Borromeo knot model of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real. The fourth ring is the True in a sense developed by Giambattista Vico — a "self-truth" of a Platonic nature, a True revealed by the process of losing, finding, and renouncing (referential) truth. This is a choice of inconsistency over consistency; a choice of completeness over incompleteness — i.e. a mirror image of Lacan's choice to be (clinically) consistent while not being able to say everything. The hinge term is *mi-dire*, which holds the key position in both options. The *mi-dire* is, in the choice of inconsistency, the ability to say two things at once: James Joyce's "twone." This constitutes a bridge between the psychoanalytic subject and the post-psychoanalytic subject, a "pervert" who must "invent a new father."

§4. By repairing the broken relationships between the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real, organic imagination imagines itself as a return to an original position (that of the True) on behalf of the recovery of a "false choice" (speaking, rather than being) that had been forced at the mirror stage. This is a *recherche du temps perdu*, which focuses, as Proust focused, on "sites of exception" — moments and objects within moments that constitute exceptions to the Symbolic order: "epiphanies," such as the taste of Madeleines, the transparency of jars lowered into rivers, or the shadows of birds on a church wall — trivial sensual events that convert into doors of the imagination. The primary site is also a primary moment, an instance of a *matrix* that is a space created within space, a time created within time. These pockets (*pochés*) are also the womb sense of the matrix-mother. They lie beyond the double boundary, the vagina and cervix, and resemble Vladimir Nabokov's favorite form, the hourglass.

The double boundary is simultaneously an element at the outer edge of the phenomena of works of art and architecture and, at the same time, a center, a place of origins. Vico makes this clear in his depiction of the first sites of human culture, clearings in a primeval forest that are also gates connecting earth and sky. The action of lifting is often portrayed literally: the construction of a *tectum* to create a shadow zone where the living mingle with the dead (the *manes*, the *lares* and *penates*). But, the physics is Lucretian: what lifts is a Venturi force perpendicular to flow, which selects and transports based on a "call" that is primarily "acousmatic." Thus, the imagination is "called into being" and lifted out of its material basis into an organic life within the transport mechanisms of the poetic. Unlike material imagination, this model does not generate antagonism between the "mechanical" process of call and transport from the "spiritual" processes of cognition and recognition. There is no radical division between "constructing" and "construing," and in this sense organic imagination reconstitutes Frascari's so-called dualities as unities in the spirit in which they were originally intended — as bridges. The merger of mechanism/automaton with recognition/realization returns to Pascal's advice: get converts to go through the "mechanical-symbolic" externalities of Christianity, do not be concerned with getting them to believe in "Christian ideas." These

will follow but their status will be primarily fictional. This is the say that the True, the first and last element of the organic imagination, cannot be stated as content. It is involved with the (retroactive) functions of the mechanism of the poetic. It automates itself and the forms that are taken up by art within the architecture of the imagination.

§5. The organic imagination is an “open architecture” whose primary features expand and refine the idea of the matrix: super-symmetry, parallax, chirality, “body loading,” and the boundary conditions and actions expounded by Harold Bloom’s three-duplex system (*Anxiety of Influence*, 1973): *askesis/demon*, *tesseræ/clinamen*, *apophrades/kenosis*. This architecture has been consolidated within the general idea of metalepsis as a formal statement of how frames operate as double frames; it is extended by the more radical idea of *catalepsis* — how action precedes thought in art, and how automaton precedes idea.

Organic imagination is conceived not as a polemical position but as an open architecture to be adapted and re-constructed, re-construed, from various theoretical positions. While it is grounded in Lacanian psychoanalysis, it follows Vico’s model of a “reception machine” open to adaptation and multiple conversions/perversions. Key examples come naturally to the use of (Gérard Genette’s) idea of metalepsis as a framing operation, but these are not intended as limiting or definitive. Rather, a move from “material imagination” to “organic imagination” is also a move from a central voice rhetoric to a cacaphony of convivial exchange, a model promoted by Ivan Illich during his years conducting seminars at the University of Pennsylvania and Penn State University (1994–1998). Organic architecture is, even in its trivial manifestations, based on open structures, recombinant forms, and the re-incorporation of error. Its logic is not just “loose” but “wild” — “erotic” is a more precise term. Like the use of concealed identity during Carnival, the aim is to maximize the mingling of genetic material, an “anything with everything” that contrasts with the selectivity of material imagination projects (canonical sources, architects, projects) that had, in its worst moments, amounted to obsession-compulsion disorder. Open architecture also involves an activation of *père-version*, the need to re-construct the function of the father whose “no” of prohibition (in the construction of the masculine) becomes a reversal, a “no” from those who were prohibited. This is the “no” of Mozart’s Don Giovanni to the demand of the statue of the dead Commendatore to repent. Giovanni refuses to give way to the requirements of the masculine, of restriction of sexuality on behalf of the Symbolic. His principle has been a model of open architecture: all women, no matter whether they are short or tall, beautiful or ugly, Spanish or French, are invited to the sexual. This is not to say that Don Giovanni introduces the sexual to women — rather, the reverse: he recognizes that the sexual has always been with and for women. He is only a “principle of recognition” allowing women to fully possess that sexuality, in a move from the Symbolic to the Imaginary, repairing the relationship with the Real. Giovanni’s lovers construct the *sinthome*, in other words. Reverting the “no” is a move from the symptom to the *sinthome*, a re-deployment of the negative, as a comic element. It is the pants that fall down around the legs, while the hero continues to walk, amidst ridicule. It is the “no-man’s land” where, during World War I, deserters from all armies met and lived a life of peace and forgiveness amidst craters and abandoned tunnels.

§6. As an open architecture, organic imagination is based on projects (“acts”) rather than theories *per se*. Even when the required rhetorical form of traditional communications commands argumentation, logical structure, and “proofs of evidence,” the organic imagination follows Vico’s advice, to rely on “proofs of the body,” i.e. transformations from the Symbolic body into the erotic body of reception, transformations that can be felt in experience if not explained or even understood. There are classical rhetorical forms devoted to just such a transformation: anacoluthon, aposiopoesis, ekphrasis All of Bloom’s paired terms involve proofs that are discovered by a condition of halving, doubling, false doubling, and chirality (left-right relations, stereo-*gnosis*).

Thus, organic imagination can find most of its primary resources in past traditions, moments in history where the consolidation of critical theory and artistic examples and output have afforded moments of clarity and used parallel terminologies. Vico’s primary source was that of Mannerist criticism of Luis Góngora and Balthazar Gracián, his most likely source for the idea of *agutezze* as witty sayings made effective by their “acute angle” operation allowing *animus* to penetrate *anima*. Other, more ancient, sources include Menippean satire, which relocated its genius in sites midway between the work and the audience. Possibly, even the Platonic dialogs could be considered as cases of this relocation, de-commissioning the literal content of the dialogs as truth-bearing while not fully empowering the reader to “think that meaning is anything he/she wants.” The incompleteness of *mi-dire* operates to identify with the void created by reversing conditions of predication: cause and effect, figure and ground, past and present, class and member, message and medium. There is never a “clean break” when polarities reverse; there is always a small gap, a remainder, an un-fillable void, like the void between falling in love and falling out of love.

§7. The organic imagination is less of an academic polemic than it is a program for “unlimited semiosis” to be enacted both within traditional projects (theses, dissertations, symposia, etc.) as well as new kinds of projects designed to optimize Ivan Illich’s principle of conviviality. Illich defined unlimited semiosis socially, by involving multiple “voices” in “conversations” which he personally hosted during his years as a visiting scholar at the University of Pennsylvania and Penn State University. The productivity of these years was driven by Illich’s exceptionally original texts on water, feminism, religion, the alphabet, etc. Illich’s idea was fundamentally that of an *ars topica*, what I identify formally with the unlimited semiosis that converts the thinking of the binary signifier (a range of meaning defined as stretching between two polar terms) into the “uncanny” of reversed predication, an *extimacy* employing Hegelian dialectic to reveal a small void or gap within the reversed conditions. Whether figure and ground, cause and effect, past and present, or container and contained, the gap sets up a dialectic dynamic for the discovery of the “no man’s land” of semiosis: a place of dissensus, originality, and free subjectivity.

endnotes

- 1 The interval known as "between the two deaths" is common to all cultures, expressed during the period of mourning the death of a loved one as a symbolic journey to a final rest. When this interval is applied to the work of art, the first death is the switch of attention from the Symbolic everyday, the normative conditions of causes and effects, to the special framed conditions of art, where "pigs can fly." So, what is death for the everyday is birth for art, symbolized in the darkening of the space of the auditorium and the conditions imposed on the audience, conditions which make them at least "act dead" (silent, immobile). The "embarrassing condition" of the dead is that they have died literally but "forgotten how to die," i.e. symbolically. This is transferred to the representations of art which, as characters, are "ghosts" who "have forgotten that they are dead," i.e. that they are simply shadows who strut and fret their hour upon the stage and are heard no more. The frame, in particular a second or "inside frame," is often used to call out this embarrassment, to humiliate the work of art as being "only an artifice."