***Homme/éternité*: architectural history against history – the outline of a tradition**

Et comme cela nous vient de Michelet, c'est l'âme de Michelet qui parle en nous.
– Pierre Michon

In his debut book *Sur les cimes du désespoir* from 1933, philosopher Emil Cioran writes the following sentences: 'La contemplation de l'éternité ne me procure-t-elle pas, en effet, un apaisement bien plus grand? Non pas *homme/histoire*, mais *homme/éternité* – voilà un rapport acceptable dans un monde qui ne vaut même pas la peine qu'on y respire.' The pessimistic worldview of Cioran urges him to dismiss completely every possible notion of 'history' – what man needs to calm down or to feel at least somewhat comfortable in this world is not historiography but rather the opposite, the annulment of history: *eternity*.

The search for the confrontation with eternity can be considered as an extreme endpoint of the critique of historiography. On the one hand, history can be considered as the realisation of an objective and irrefutable view on the past; while on the other hand, eternity is the place where every possible historical determination remains absent.

The critique on the construction of history, has been an important philosophical strategy since the advent of modernity – and since Nietzsche. It is sufficient here to quote the still very vigorous and quite famous first sentences of Nietzsches second 'untimely meditation', entitled *On the use and abuse of history for life*, published in 1874, which Nietzsche starts with a quote from Goethe:
'"Incidentally, I despise everything which merely instructs me without increasing or immediately enlivening my activity." These are Goethe's words. With them our consideration of the worth and the worthlessness of history may begin. For this work is to set down why we must in all seriousness despise instruction without vitality, knowledge which enervates activity, and history as an expensive surplus of knowledge and a luxury, because we still lack what is still most essential to us and because what is superfluous is hostile to what is essential.'

In the tradition of Nietzsche, some modern people do not believe that history and 'good' historiography correspond with the tragic, difficult and incomprehensible aspects of human life. Even more so: the writing of history, the unconditional belief in an exact historiography, has nothing but inhuman consequences: in the name of enlightenment, progress and its dialectics, abstractions and categorizations are made that reduce mankind to schemes and counterfeits, and that simply destroy every last remainder of what was once called humanism. History and historiography, therefore, have become absolute values, which should not be discussed and which have no direct 'use' (except for a sometimes eductional profit, but then only as a by-product; or of course as a peer-to-peer surplus in the academic industry). History is there for the sake of history, and historians do not serve themselves or 'mankind' – but they serve History. What is an historian? Someone who decides to suppress his or her human characteristics or desires as much as possible, in order to study – paradoxically – the human activity of the past.

The first part of this definition corresponds with a word that I have been avoiding until now – although it is part of the title of this conference – and that is: *science*. If *eternity* is the extreme point omega of history, than *science* is the point alpha of historiography. Everyone who really believes that the writing of history is possible in an objective way, hopes to achieve scientific results.

Therefore, the difficulties with history and historiography that are experienced by the likes of Nietzsche and Cioran, can be summarized by the complete equation of historiography with science. It is important, however, to constantly *historicize* this evolution of history, and to understand that historiography *is* not necessarily and by definition scientific.

In the doctoral thesis of philosopher Bart Verschaffel from 1985, and in the article thas wat based on this thesis and thas was published in 1989, *Historiography as 'reality science'* – a remarkable but somewhat ominous text is quoted, written in 1980 by an historian called Geoffry Barraclough in a report of the UNESCO on the status of historiographic science. Barraclough writes – and Verschaffel quotes – that 'contemporary historiography has left the "pre-scientific" domain to become "scientific"': thanks to the social sciences, the attention of historiography has shifted 'from the particular to the universal, from the events to the constants and from the story to the analysis.' This evolution is – as Nietzsche would stress – not necessarily a good thing, and more importantly: it *was* (and hopefully it still is) not a necessity.

In 1980, when this text was written, and in 1985, when this text was quoted – it still was an option to consider the writing of history as unscientific, or to claim that if the writing of history wanted to survive, it needed to oppose itself to science, and to absorb some notions of the existence of eternity. I quote Verschaffel: 'In another line of thought, history – always understood as "knowledge of the individual" – has defended itself, by searching a place not next to the sciences, but in opposition to science. The individual is a different "region of being", that can be called for the sake of convience "the reign of the spirit", and that is approachable and understandable on its own terms.'

Historiography, therefore, does not need to be analytic; it does not need to be 'constant'; and it does not need to be 'universal' – even more so: when it is all these things at once, it becomes science, and it is therefore no longer historiography. I quote Verschaffel one last time: 'What the positivist approach to history dismisses as "evocation" and "literature", is in fact a very special way of entering the condition of being of the human mind, or (with a quote from Von Humboldt) "the secret of individuality".'

To summarize: an historian always operates in a magnetic force field that is engendered by two poles: the one pole – let's call it the positive one – is science; and the other one, the negative pole, is eternity; the one pole makes the historian forget that he is human; while the other pole – put somewhat pathetic – forces him to rescue or at least express his own soul.

It is remarkable how these rules of attraction can be discerned in the fate, the condition and the history of *architectural* history. There exists an entire but only incompletely charted tradition of a 20th- and 21th century approach to architecture and architecture history going *against history*, or at least against history that wants to realize itself as science.

Although the multiplication, the success and the institutionalization of architecture history during the last 30 years might suggest otherwise, there is no human activity that is more approriate for historicizing 'unscientifically' than architecture. In other words: architecture always wants to be more than just an object of research – or put differently: architecture asks more of its researchers than just a scientific approach.

This becomes clear when we turn to one of the most famous and most concise definitions of science – the definition given by Max Weber in his *Vocation*-lectures given in Munich in

1918. The goal of science, Weber says, is to be superseded; what scientists have achieved will be obselete in ten, twenty or fifty years; science, Weber says, is 'harnessed to the course of progress' – science, in other words, is everything *but* eternal; what the scientist really wants is to be the stepping stone for further progress – a stepping stone that will ultimately be forgotten.

If it is exactly the writing of history that becomes scientific, a strange thing occurs. An historian writes about the past, and in a sense tries to rescue the past from oblivion – but at the same time, the historian wants his own work to fall into oblivion as quickly as possible, because in order to be 'scientifically good', it needs to be superseded and stepped upon by his peers, so that the following generation can use, digest and in a way annihilate his work. Scientific historiography is therefore a pure contradiction in terms: focus on the past, but by doing so let the *focus* itself become past as soon as possible.

This absurd deadlock of positivism is the main force behind the Nietzschean critique of modern historiography – but more importantly for this context, it is architecture that can be used to transcend this deadlock. What needs to be done is prefigured in the quotation by Cioran; architectural history should not be written under the sign of science, but under the sign of eternity – which does not necessarily mean that history should be entirely abolished by eternity.

The uncharted tradition of an architecture history going against history I spoke about earlier, manifests itself in very different authors and texts, but what these approaches have in common, is that the architecture of the past is fundamentally considered as *not being a thing of the past*. Architecture is – I hope everyone will agree – consisting of things that last a long time, and that therefore are not influenced directly by time. Architecture gets old, but it does not 'pass'. The church of San Lorenzo in Florence, the Sainte-Geneviève library in Paris, the Neue Nationalgallery in Berlin, de Kunsthal in Rotterdam – by making some abstractions in the domain of renovation and conservation –, these buildings have not changed since they were commissioned or visited for the very first time.

The historian working under the sign of eternity does exactly this: he considers the architecture not as an object simply because of its age. This means there is essentially no difference between the persons who visited the architecture contemporary with its construction and the historian who visits it nowadays. This kind of historian therefore identifies himself with the 'historical subject', claiming that it is not necessary to act differently then when a building was first commissioned.

This has different consequences for architectural historiography.

I will try to give here only a few examples, and take the risk of starting with Manfredo Tafuri. As we all know, Andrew Leach's monograph on Tafuri is entitled *Choosing History*. What is a radical choice for history other than a constant refusal of history becoming science? According to Tafuri, historiography has to sabotage itself from the inside, making sure that the analysis is permitted – or rather forced to go on forever. A radical choice for history and its immense complexities always represents a choice against the scientific reduction of the past. Therefore, one could say schematically, Tafuri constantly refuses to reduce the reality as it was experienced by the historical subject.

Another, more problematic example is Christian Norberg-Schulz. Norberg-Schulz, as was – partly – pointed out in *Architecture's Historical Turn*, the recent book by Jorge Otero-Pailos, tried to get rid of the problems of history by advancing the idea that nothing ever changes, which resulted in a collectivist historiography that embraced the idea of eternity so uncritically that it led to sometimes ridicule consequences. On the one hand, Norberg-Schulz forced himself to regard contemporary architecture without taking into account contemporary phenomena (such as cars or extreme urbanization); and on the other hand, he fell back on pseudo-scientific methods to make swift assumptions on what historical subjects were looking for in architecture.

The Belgian historian Geert Bekaert combined the activities of the historian with that of the critic. From the scientific historical project, every form of 'decision-making' is banished: the historian has to sift and sort the results of many other activities from the past – historiography is like doing the dishes after everybody else has finished eating. Again, the historian writing under the sign of eternity, could – like Bekaert did – talk out of turn in order to impose a value-system on the past, therefore not simply assuming that something is worthwile, beyond good and evil or even interesting just because it is old; or assuming, on the other hand, that there is no 'aesthetical' or 'existential' enjoyment in architectural objects from the past.

A last and more contemporary example of the historian who would not get his PhD in a completely orthodox academic milieu, is Pier Vittorio Aureli. At the recent *Future of History*-congres at the Taubman College in Michigan, Aureli did everything to stress that he is not an historian but an architect. And indeed, what he does in some of his recent writings is, simply put, make historiography operative again, thereby seemingly contradicting Tafuri's plea for a non-operative historiography – but, on a deeper level, subscribing Tafuri's call for a critical historiography. In the contemporary globalized – and academized – architecture culture, a scientific historiography is *non-operative* by definition and by institutional convention (while the more popular side of architecture culture in the media operates only on the day-to-day agenda of consumerism and capitalism). In Tafuri's day, writing non-operative history was something extraordinary, while nowadays the opposite has become true – and while nowadays it is exactly operative historiography that criticizes the debilitating status-quo of our contemporary situation, in which every form of project is lacking. I quote from one of Aureli's writings, the wonderful small book *The project of autonomy*, in which he investigates a movement that emerged in Italy in the 1970s: 'My effort has been motivated by a deep feeling of affinity toward the various protagonists of the autonomy project. (…) I believe it is possible to learn from these experiences how a new political subject might be materially constructed from within.' Learning from history how to design and how to live… this is, in my view, the virtuous demolishing of one of the many taboo's that is inflicted on us by the scientification of architectural historiography.

To summarize, Tafuri, Norberg-Schulz, Bekaert, Aureli – and there are many others – have, with varying results and different methods, understood that we cannot *know* history, and that a completely scientific approach to historiography is simply impossible, or if it isn't impossible than it certainly is excrutiatingly dull.

The contemplation of history, to come back to the quotation by Cioran at the beginning of this lecture, can only offer (some) salvation when history is regarded under the sign of eternity – or when, to come back to the title of this conference, architectural history is an *applied* science – which means that it should always be applied to the reality of the historical subject on the one hand, and to the reality of the historian on the other hand.

In a comment on the writings of Lacan, the literary sociologist Fredric Jameson has pondered, like so many others did, on the question of what Lacan meant when he was talking about 'the real'. 'The Real, or what is perceived as such,' Lacan wrote, 'is what resists symbolization absolutely.' The real is what cannot be grasped, what is impossible to put into the words, what keeps on paying its respect to the mystery of this world and of this life – and it is, as such, the only thing that still resists to – what again Weber called in his *Vocation*-lecture – the disentchantment of the world. 'It is not terribly difficult to say what is meant by the Real in Lacan,' Jameson wrote. 'The real is simply History itself.'

Considering architectural historiography as a science, is trying to rationalize the Real – choosing history with eternity in mind, applying history to reality, interpreting the past rather than analyzing it, is trying to do the exact opposite.

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