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WHAT IS ICONIC ARCHITECTURE?

For Theodor W. Adorno writing in 1953, Hollywood cinema was a medium of "regression," based on infantile wish fulfillment, manufactured by the industrial repetition of the filmic image that he called a modern "hieroglyphics"—like the archaic language of pictures in Ancient Egypt, which guaranteed immortality after death in Egyptian burial rites.¹ In his essay "Prolog zum Fernsehen, Bildersprache," the filmic "language of images" visualised forbidden ideations of sex, death and domination lodged in the unconscious of the mass spectator.² Film, in other words, takes the spectator on a journey into their unconscious in order to control from within. It works, as the spectator believes the film is speaking to them in his/her very own image-language (the unconscious), making the spectator do and buy whatever capitalism demands. Modernity for Adorno is precisely the instrumentalisation of the collective unconscious through the mediatic images of the culture industry.

Arguably, today the iconic architecture industry is the new executor of archaic images of modernity linked to rituals of death, promises of omnipotence and immortality. As this essay argues, such buildings that we call iconic are not a reflection of external 'reality,' but regression to an internal architectural polemic that secretly carries out the disciplinary rituals of modernism's death, and seeks to make good on the liabilities of architectural history.

The term 'iconic' derived from the Greek word *eikōn* (meaning 'image') that referred to the ancient portrait statues of victorious athletes thought to bear a direct similitude with their parent divinities. Adorno's animus toward American cinema issues from his view of Hollywood as an iconic form,³ namely the mimetic relationship between the filmic image and a manufactured 'reality' filtered by capitalism's objectives: the visual mimesis of the unconscious by film that excavates the neuroses not for examination but to reinforce them.⁴ As mimesis and iconicity, the cinema propagates the myth of the eternity of Capital through its central technique, Persistence of Vision, whereby prolific film frames appear as a single image – a hieroglyphic text.

Iconic architecture today is the new mimetic technology of the contemporary city, via the proliferation of the digital rendering that immortalises the building-to-come in a magical forever space behind the computer screen, which, as this paper will endeavour to demonstrate, conceals architecture's regressive project toward modernist history.⁵ The ritual duplication and circulation of digital imagery surrounding iconic architecture seen in close succession, quite apart from the actual, and often as yet unbuilt buildings, forms a new hieroglyphics of architectural culture, a Persistence of Vision that spawns the illusion of aesthetic velocity and acceleration, just as it conceals the social reality of the real buildings and rigidity of their ideology.

There are three genres of iconic architecture. Normally viewed as the Olympian victors of architectural history, this paper will show how each typology represents a legible and distinct model of regression that not only speaks a particular version of history, but seeks to administer an intellectual solution. It is the notion of athletic 'victor' that replaces any serious account of the iconic project, and as there is no winner, but only different versions of history. The iconic project is replete with symptomatic meaning, and Adorno provides the intellectual tools for its demythologisation.

Elysium/1

Type 1 iconic proffers a green deathly paradise, like the Elysian Fields, in a Marxist exchange with you, the spectator [Fig. 1]. In Greek mythology, after death, souls would be judged by three gods and then delivered to Elysium, Tartarus, Asphodel Fields, or the Fields of Punishment.⁶ Elysium was for the pure souls. It consisted of green plains, mountains and valleys, where "men led an easier life than any where else in the world, for in Elysium there falls not rain, nor hail, nor snow, but Oceanus breathes ever with a West wind that sings softly from the sea, and gives fresh life to all men."⁷ Verso to Elysium, Tartarus, was the sunless underworld for those who sinned against the gods.⁸ The central motif of the Elysian typology is the 'paradise in a bad world' – its contemporary exemplars are: Gwanggyo Green Power Center by MVRDV in Seoul (2007), which can be described as 'a verdant acropolis of organic hill structures' for a 'self-sufficient city' of 77,000 inhabitants; [Fig. 2] Wangjing Soho in Beijing by Zaha Hadid Architects, (2014), a mixed use development of 'three green mountains'; and Farmscraper by Vincent-Callebaut in Shenzhen (2013). Arguably, the first Elysian building was the Babylonian Hanging Garden in 600 BC, a vertical, green, with an ascending series of tiered gardens rising from the centre of the city. Such vainglorious structures, then and now, have nothing to do with environment or social 'goodness.'⁹ Rather, they trade in the Elysian fantasy of an afterlife, a return to a paradise that never was; where the signifier 'Green' does not mean ecology, but promises eternity – forevermore.

The digital elysium that is so ubiquitous in the iconic architecture industry represents the quid pro quo Adorno called the living death.¹⁰ What matters is not the architect or buildings per se but the deal being offered. In exchange for your life, you get to live in paradise. But you are dead. If there is a scant difference between Zaha Hadid's computer rendering in 2014 and the film poster for *Elysium*, it is the exchange image that advertises eternal life. Yet, Max Weber would have denounced these green supremacist landscapes as "monocratic planning," and Georg Simmel may have described them as the realm of the "eversame."¹¹ But this is not due to a lack of imagination by the architects – ubiquity and duplication is what protects the ritual function of iconic architecture for the discipline and the so-called "masses" who are just as invested in the Hellenic myth as we are.



FIGURE 1 Digital Rendering 2007, MVRDV, Power Centre Design, Gwanggyo, South Korea, Available: <http://www.mvrdv.nl>

To this day, modernity still means the promise to fulfill metaphysical wishes, and for modern architecture, the failure to make good on that promise. As its tattered biography goes, historical modernism not only failed to deliver omnipotence and immortality to the modern subject – it was charged with its hostile opposite: Hiroshima, Auschwitz, and the cult of death. Instead of furnishing the postwar world with elysian cities – it gave birth to dystopias, de-humanisation, and banal destruction. This profound miscarriage and structural complicity of postwar architecture with capitalist development created a systemic guilt – a debt in architectural history (and like all debts, it must be repaid in a specific, material way). Historical debt is precisely what the iconic architecture industry’s vision of eternity and immortality seeks to conceal in the architectural image.

At the same time, iconic architecture was born into a world of real economic debt produced by the longer narrative of modernity and capitalism; and it has a clear historical function in this regard. Iconic architecture in Europe, for example, seeks to monetise debt within a collapsed global economy into a veritable currency. The purpose of the first iconic building, Frank Gehry’s museum in Bilbao, was to attract foreign capital, to save a city ravaged by post-industrialisation – by modernist history itself. The promise being made in this type of commission is that excessive expenditure and debt for an iconic project will save the European city – and therefore right the wrongs of modernity. Since 2000, however, economists such as Leslie Sklair and Andrew Zimbalist have identified that iconic projects often result in significant financial losses.¹² The iconic project persists in order to produce an architectural image for the ideology of digital world capitalism through the redemption of a fallen modernity. That is what makes iconic architecture a medium of historical regression.



FIGURE 2 Digital Renderings 2013, Neill Blomkamp, *Elysium*, Digital Renderings 2013, Zaha Hadid Architects and Patrik 2013. Fair Use copyright (film stills are part works) Schumacher, Wangjing Soho, Beijing, 2014.



Left to right: Digital Renderings 2013, Vincent Callebaut Architectures, SARL Paris, Farmscraper, Shenzhen, China.

Loop/2

The second typology, comes in the form of a loop [Fig. 3]: its exemplars are the Guggenheim, Bilbao (1997); the CCTV Headquarters by OMA in Beijing (2004-2012); Swallows Nest, Taiwan by Vincent Callebaut, (project 2013); and the New National Stadium of Japan for the Tokyo Olympics 2020 by Zaha Hadid Architects (project 2013). Its formal genus is inspired by the idea of a technological loop and is made possible by computer algorithms that produce the illusion of a self-enclosed surface. This typology comes in many forms: a loop of 6 horizontal and vertical sections in the CCTV tower, an elliptical Möbius strip in Taiwan, a concise loop for Tokyo, or the spasmodic circuitry of Bilbao. To use Adorno's apothegm, Type 2 buildings which appear to be different are essentially the same, because the infinite Loop represents distraction from ideology via an unbroken gaze.¹³

For Adorno, film is an uninterrupted cognitive loop blocking the spectator from thought or reflection. In "Transparencies on Film," the aesthetic loop "incites the viewers to fall into step as if in a parade...As the eye is carried along, it joins the current of all those who are responding to the same appeal."¹⁴ Callebaut's competition renderings depict a triangle rotated 80 times around an elliptical Möbius strip, whose resultant volume surfaces from the ground plane, producing vaulted apertures to a central void that is an "endless patio." The concept of endless circulation and mobility coincides with the endless circulation of the digital image that insulates the spectator and architect from thought, just as it perpetuates the myth of limitless capital. The CCTV tower similarly locks the spectator in a 'closed loop electric circuit,' providing a return path for the endless current of architectural masses who click on its image or visit the building. In Adorno's words, the eye mechanically moves along the prescribed circuit – not of its own free will but by the order of the iconic architecture industry. "The consensus which it propagates strengthens blind opaque authority."¹⁵

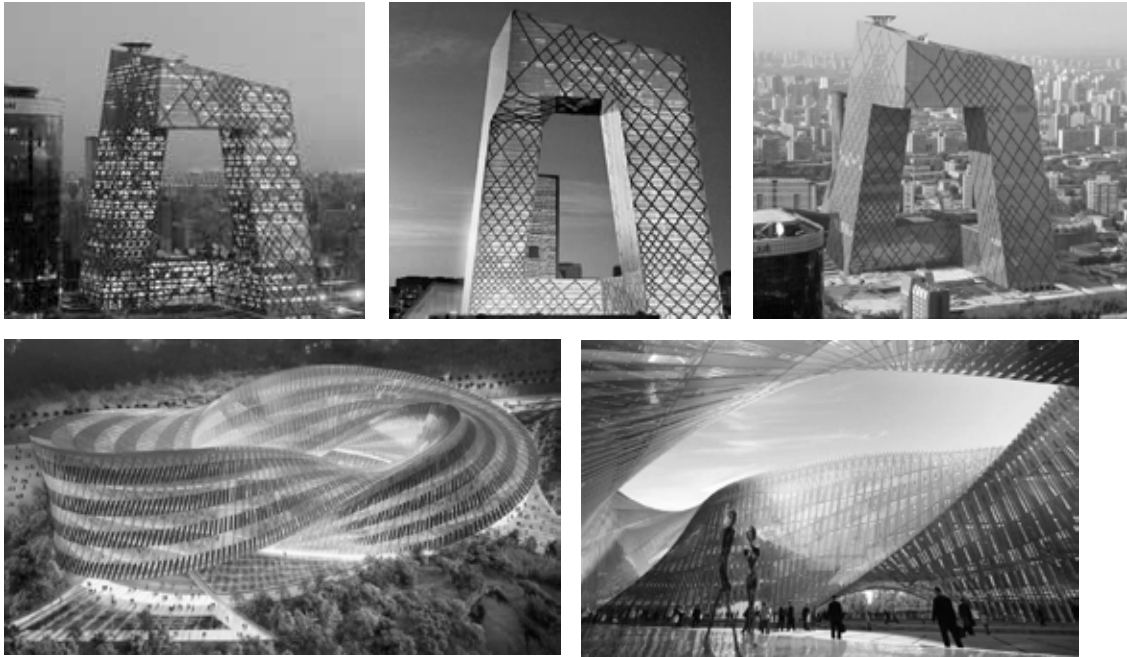


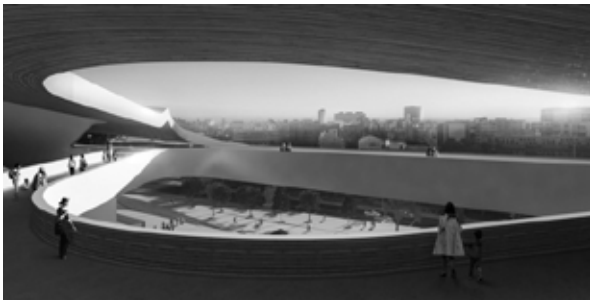
FIGURE 3 *Left*, Digital Rendering 2008, OMA, CCTV Headquarters Beijing, 2012; *Centre to right*, Photographs of building.

The aesthetic goals of OMA's building are to transcend the Cartesian coordinate system – the vanishing point of modernist ideation at the level of pure form. In simple terms, a building like the CCTV tower is no longer an object of space-time, but the very medium of space and time itself without subjects or objects. In Koolhaas's quixotic image, we see a mirrored pair of mathematical axes connected by a pair of single members. Rather than extending toward infinity and intersecting at zero, the duplicate pair of L's formed by two vertical and horizontal axes appear to meet, and therefore intersect at infinity, thus forming the infinity loop. In this version of modernity, infinity is the degree zero or absolute origin. The goal of Type 2, thus articulated in formalist terms, is to paradoxically complete the modernist project itself, without the interference of history. Clearly, we remain in the realm of the wishes and deathly life in all its forms.

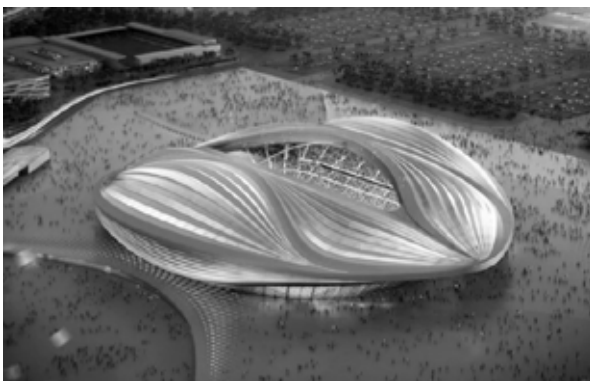
There is a sense in which the spectator of the CCTV building, like an electron, could be in two of the building's branches at once, or jump from one branch to the next, or travel through the digitised walls of the surveillance envelope. This is not cause for applause but the look of reification (*Verdinglichheit*) to use Georg Lukács's famous argument where the architectural technology makes human beings seem like mere "things" obeying the inexorable laws of quantum physics, which becomes a crude metaphor for capitalism as the highest authority.¹⁶ In order to experience Type 2 at the molecular level, the spectator must be dematerialised into sub-atomic particles, into the empty, infinite space of the iconic field. If you buy a Type Elysian/1, you will enter heaven, if you buy a Type Loop/2, you will enter the realm of the post-human. You will disappear.



Left to right: Digital Renderings 2013, Vincent Callebaut, Swallows Nest, Taichung City Cultural Center, Taiwan; The 'Endless Patio' .



Left to right: Digital Renderings 2013, Zaha Hadid, New National Stadium of Japan Venue For the Tokyo Olympics 2020, Tokyo.



Digital Rendering 2013, Zaha Hadid, Qatar FIFA World Cup 2022 Stadium Design, Qatar.

The building pushes its agenda of dematerialisation i.e. the digital transcendence of matter all the more effective in the surprising duplication of the digital model standing before me. More than any other example of iconic architecture, this building eerily resembles a computer model, or a hologram – simultaneously flat and vertical, present and remote, hot and cold. The mythic digital surface and our fantastic ability to convert what is immaterial into built fact opened up a new form of reification unavailable in Adorno's time, yet our digital project confirms the same idealist fallacy that Marxism contests. Iconic architects have for ten years claimed to embrace material "reality" and "pragmatism" over "theory;" yet the iconic project is deeply invested in weightlessness and transcendence, in short, in myth. The CCTV tower has the appearance of desirability, but what we desire is perhaps more humanity, more engagement, and not antimatter or descent into the terrifying posthuman at the threshold of physics. The iconic architecture industry tells us we want the heavenly transcendence that it promises but it is, according to Adorno, "the ideology of ideology."¹⁷

The Sacrifice/3

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Max Horkheimer wrote that eventually cannibalism was no longer necessary, but tribes continued to practise it for its ritual purpose. Iconic architecture of the third typology is a sacrificial object that allegorises the ritual processes of historical reification elsewhere concealed in the iconic project. On the eve of the 21st century, Coop Himmelblau's Urban Entertainment Center in Guadalajara Mexico (1998) offered itself as the bleeding



FIGURE 4 Digital Rendering 1998, Coop Himmelblau, New Urban Entertainment Center, Guadalajara Mexico, Not realised, Available: www.coop-himmelblau.at, © ISOCHROM.com, Vienna.

body of the modern project. [Fig. 4] If entertainment for Adorno means insulating oneself from the social ground from what is negative, the iconic sacrifice today “relates it to a collective body, the tribe into which the spilled blood of the tribe’s sacrificed member is supposed to flow back.”¹⁸ Unlike the first two typologies which repress the original conflict, Type 3 attempts a restoration in the building which takes on the appearance of historical crisis, becoming itself an act of violence.¹⁹

In this architecture, ritual cremation of the historical object is undergone by the burning of avant garde tropes – the Tatlin tower, the spiral, the Corbusian promenade and stuffed piloti – which together, like the burning bush in the Bible, nonetheless remain standing.²⁰ The Visual and Performing Arts School (2009) similarly reconstructs the modernist problem formulated almost 100 years ago by Le Corbusier and the Soviet critique of modernism. Its brazen reenactment of Vladimir Tatlin’s spiral scaffold (*the* symbol for a once revolutionary modernism) was as provocative and contested in 2009 as Tatlin’s monument in 1919. In this torturous process of reification to summons a ghost-modernity, the fractured exchange object is made to stand in for the shards of history and severed social relations that all the king’s horses and all the king’s men could not put back together again. In other words, this is another attempt at another kind of redemption.

Russian Constructivism was the movement that inspired the name Coop Himmelblau, “Sky-Construction Cooperative.”²¹ But this is not “deconstructivist” architecture, which ended in 1998, because their work, from the UFA-Cinema Center 1998 until now, does not seek to destabilise any metaphysical origin.²² Rather, it is an express train to the origin itself, the Soviet articulation of the historical problem by the avant-garde movement that in 1914 invented formalism, based on the constructivist premise that art is an instrument for political critique. That revolutionary proposition was never satisfied in any of the iterations of modernism, then or now – and remains an outstanding debt that has plagued the discipline for almost 100 years.

A final example, the Musée des Confluences in Lyon, France was built from 2000-2014 effectively documenting the unfolding of the iconic project. [Fig. 5]

Its fragmented envelope reads as an historical palimpsest, but also an empty mausoleum or carcass wheeled in for temporary purposes. Its weak relationship with the ground tells us the ground of iconic architecture is what is missing today. Fifteen years since Bilbao, we have still not grasped the historical totality of the iconic project. [Fig. 6] Yet the



FIGURE 5 Coop Himmelblau, Musée des Confluences, Lyon, France 2000-2014, “The Carcass/Mausoleum.”

hole at the apex of the museum provides the answer, the hole suggests the self-consuming nature of capitalism intrinsic to its history, the rapacious black hole of capital that teaches us there is no escape from the demand for capital in the struggling contemporary city – that is the emergency and ungrounding that fuels the iconic architecture industry, not a happy pragmatism but the realities of fiscal crisis. To put this into current perspective, today we are no longer afraid of the destruction of the European city, but the evacuation of entire countries from the Eurozone. The hole is the only part of the museum that is solid and real, the rest is anarchy. The only truth today – the only indisputable reality – is the truth of debt and austerity since 2007/9, the hole from which capital may never resurface. Coop Himmelblau’s works are manifestly iconic – in scale, budget, purpose, drama, and digital method – but they are unique in employing mimetic technology without worshipping mimesis. Their body of work does not lament the death of modernism but embraces it through ritual, montage, metaphor.

Coda

In monetary terms, the surplus value drawn by each typology is symbolically equivalent to the repayment plan of modernity’s debt, the ‘final’ resolution of all disciplinary liabilities. Type 1 iconic does not seek to repay the debt, but declares bankruptcy, and thereby promises a state of permanent capital in the form of an afterlife. Type 2 is not morally delinquent, it rather promises to repay the debt directly, monetising the building into a new form of currency; while Type 3 is primarily a Left protest that the debt cannot be repaid under any circumstances (it is Greece in this scenario). There is a sense in which Type 3 longs for the liberation promised by death itself, evident in imagery such as the coffin in the Musée des Confluences; in doing so, it avoids the metaphysical conceits of Type 1 and 2. The ritual purpose of its sacrifice in Lyon is the futile reenactment of the tragedy of the architectural discipline that we call a dead modernism. Futile, because Type 3 will never repay its debts, as Louis Althusser says there can never be the “defeat, once and for all, of ideology.” Type 3 is condemned to liberate between historical reality and the metaphysical wishes. But *that* intellectual struggle, with the forces of historical revisionism, is what defines the crisis of the iconic project.²³

Yet, the lessons from the iconic architecture industry go beyond our internal crisis. The demand for marketability of entertainment by the iconic architecture industry is transforming the economic composition of all commodities in the contemporary city and iconic architecture is changing the structure of capitalism itself.²⁴ Architecture's purpose, then, is not to provide liberation from ideology, but to teach the spectator about capitalism and modernity through the historical instrument of the architectural image. That is how iconic architecture becomes a form of cognition not only capable of negative thought (critique), but essential to the struggle of capitalism in the contemporary city.



FIGURE 6 Coop Himmelblau, Musée des Confluences, Lyon, France 2000-2014, "The Hole"

Endnotes

- 1 From *Prolog zum Fernsehen* 1953 to *Das Schema der Massenkultur* in 1981, Adorno likened film frames to cultural ideograms.
- 2 My translation. Original: "Als Bild ist die Bilderschrift Mittel einer Regression, in der Produzent und Konsument sich zusammenfinden; als Schrift stellt sie die archaischen Bilder der Moderne zur Verfügung."
- 3 For Adorno, film is too close to "reality," (hence mimetic) and therefore it becomes an extension of and advertisement for capitalism. Conversely, the audio record is a material inscription that bears no surface resemblance to the sound produced; as Miriam Hansen put it, it doesn't derive from an iconically asserted surface mimesis like film. Art for Adorno is precisely that which maintains a distance from reality, because it is that distance, what Adorno calls "autonomy," that permits the subject to negate dominant ideology, to think for him or herself.
- 4 As others have remarked, Adorno once quoted Leo Lowenthal who said that the culture industry is "psychoanalysis in reverse."
- 5 For my original argument, see Simone Brott, "Modernity's Opiate, or the Crisis of Iconic Architecture," *Log: Observations on Architecture and the Contemporary City* 26, New York: Anycorp (Fall 2012): 49-50.
- 6 Homer, *The Odyssey* (London: Rich. Field for Nathaniel Butter, 1615).
- 7 Cited edition: Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Samuel Butler, 10 ed. (London: Longmans, Green, [1898] 1999), Book IV, Section 46.

- 8 Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Samuel Butler (London: Longmans, Green, [1898] 1999), Book VIII.
- 9 According to an OECD report, architecture produces 40% of global carbon dioxide emissions. Sustainability is ostensibly outside the parameters of the building industry – and that would be even more true for the kinds of energy intensive processes of erecting an iconic monument. This however is not the point of the essay, to level ecological critique at any building. The critique is of the image.
- 10 For Adorno, mimesis and reification of art under the culture industry is the ‘living death.’ The phrase appears in the opening epigraph from Ferdinand Kürnberger: *Das Leben lebt nicht* (Life does not live) in “Reflections from the damaged life” Part One Section 1 in Theodor W Adorno, “Minima Moralia,” Marxist Internet Archive, 2005, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/adorno/1951/mm/>.
- 11 Weber cited in Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, trans. J M Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991), 111. Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money* (Psychology Press, 2004), xiv. Adorno also uses “the realm of the eversame” in Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, 192.
- 12 Andrew Zimbalist, *Circus Maximus: The Economic Gamble Behind Hosting the Olympics and the World Cup* (Brookings Institution Press, 2015); Jeb Sprague, “Transnational Capitalist Class in the Global Financial Crisis: A Discussion with Leslie Sklair,” *Globalizations* 6, no. 4 (2009).
- 13 Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry,” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Allen Lane, 1972), 95. They write: “All mass culture under monopoly is identical,” objects of the culture industry are the same, etc.
- 14 Theodor W. Adorno and Thomas Y. Levin, “Transparencies on Film,” *New German Critique* (1981): 203.
- 15 Theodor W. Adorno and Anson G. Rabinbach, “Culture Industry Reconsidered,” *ibid.*, no. 6 (Autumn 1975): 17. Theodor W. Adorno, , and Anson G. Rabinbach. “Culture Industry Reconsidered.” *New German Critique*, no. 6 (Autumn 1975): 17.
- 16 Georg Lukács and György Lukács, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat (1923),” in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 95. Lukács critiques reification for the corrupted view of human beings as “mere things” obeying the laws of capitalism, as if they are scientific laws. Lukács is referring to Karl Marx, *Capital* (1894), vol. III The Process of Capitalist Production as a Whole (International Publishers, 1959), 384-5.
- 17 Adorno and Levin, “Transparencies on Film,” 204. Note, the project of ahistoricity does not eliminate the fourth dimension, the fourth axis of time which we can always recover in any iconic building.
- 18 Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Allen Lane, 1972), 41.
- 19 Theodor W Adorno, “Prologue to Television,” in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords, European Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 54. Adorno thinks that the purpose of cultural commodities is to “accommodate repressed sexual impulses of the masses” but as per psychologist G. Legman “sexuality is replaced by the representation of desexualized brutality and acts of violence.”
- 20 Coop Himmelblau’s manifesto “Architecture must burn” and “architecture must blaze” are found here: Coop Himmelblau, “Coop Himmelblau: Wolf D. Prix & Partner,” CHBL, <http://www.coop-himmelblau.at/>.
- 21 See Frank Werner, *Covering and Exposing: The Architecture of Coop Himmelblau*, trans. from the German by Michael Robinson (2000); Martina Kandeler-Fritsch and Thomas Kramer (eds.), *Coop Himmelblau: Wolf D. Prix, Get Off of My Cloud: Texts, 1968–2005* (2005).
The constructivists’ term formalism appears in Constructivism in 1919, yet they rejected the idea of autonomous art: that is the key to understanding the relationship between formalism – as we understand it within our discipline – and modernist architectural history.
- 22 The previous works throughout the 1980s and early to mid 1990s do not employ the scale, budget or mimetic technology that characterises the iconic episteme from the end of the 1990s.
- 23 For Louis Althusser Marxism was a science of conflict: “political factions and revisionism are inherent to Marxist theory and political praxis, because dialectical materialism is the philosophic product of class struggle,” 35.
- 24 Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 128.