

Kenneth Frampton: The Violence of Quotation

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Abstract

In Modern Architecture: a critical history (1980), Kenneth Frampton was one of the early historians using epigraph at the beginning of each chapter. Considering whether the epigraph used in each chapter complies with or compliments Frampton's discussion of the subject explored in the chapter is a valid way of investigating his historiography of modern architecture. My take in this paper is rather a modest one. Starting with the Benjaminian notion of constellation, this paper will present a critical reading of Frampton's introduction to his famous book, and its implications for architectural historiography today. The text opens with a long quotation from Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History", written in 1940. My point is not to argue for the substitution of one vision of historiography with another one. Rather, I want emphasize the historicity of Frampton's text, what it is in it that makes Benjamin relevant to contemporary situation. Dialectically, I will examine the extent to which the relevance of Benjamin's text, its eventual survival and untimely mediation across history, is the very source of the demystification of the authority of the text itself. Finally, the success and/or failure of Frampton's short introduction to his rather dense historiography will be measured against the ways the historian tries to rescue the debris of the past. Looking at the implied anachronism in Frampton's extrapolation of the historicity of Benjamin's text, and moving it to a different temporality, will set the scope of my critical reading of his introductory text.

I

The quotations in my works are like robbers lying ambush on the highway to attack the passerby with weapons drawn and rob him of his conviction.¹

It is well known that Walter Benjamin wished to write a book consisting only of quotations. To quote an author in confirmation or refutation of an argument is one thing; to write a book of quotations is another. It is hard to imagine what Benjamin's intention was in putting together such a volume. However, imagining a book peppered with quotation page after page elucidates two theoretical strategies Benjamin pursued in his philosophical reflections on history: montage and constellation. The first, montage is a conceptual and technical device for making a thing out of various fragments, as evident in both carpentry (one of the oldest crafts) and cinematography, the most modern artwork today. The other, constellation, means "a group of stars forming a recognizable pattern that is traditionally named after its apparent form or identified with a mythological figure".² I will return to the implications of this definition of constellation for the historiography of architecture in general, and Kenneth Frampton's take on the subject in particular. For now, I would like to consider the two related types of violence involved in using quotation. The first concerns the extraction of one sentence or two from its original con-text. The second involves the insertion of a quotation into the text of another author. Whereas the first violence is justified based on the content of a text, it is a direct or indirect need to confirm an argument with the help of another author's words, the second instance is considered part of an author's judicious right to do violence to his/her own text, using another writer's statement, as far as it is properly referenced in the footnotes or bibliography. In both cases, "the authority invoked by quotation is founded precisely on the destruction of the authority" sealed by the history of culture.³ We can provisionally say that the totality of a narrative is nothing but a montage of statements and quotations that, similar to a constellation, try to disclose a myth: perhaps a historical fact, or a lucid argument, or a detailed representation of events as is the case with the nineteenth century novel.

In what follows, I will attempt to unpack Frampton's short introductory text to what is today his most famous book *Modern Architecture: a critical history* (1980), in conjunction with a brief discussion of Benjamin's concept of history. I will also attempt to expand Benjamin's notion of constellation with reference to the two realms of the cultural and the technical which frame the premises of Frampton's historiography of modern architecture.

II

The quotation Frampton chose for his introduction to *Critical History* is from Walter Benjamin's "Thesis on the Philosophy of History" (1940), a famous passage that is frequently discussed and widely quoted. Numbered IX, the passage starts with a poem written by Gerhard Scholem, a close friend and confidante of Benjamin.⁴ Scholem's poem, called *Gruss vom Angelus*, was written in reference to a 1920 Paul Klee painting, *Angelus Novus*, a print of which Benjamin had purchased in 1921. Both the painting and Benjamin's interpretation of it have become icons of left-oriented scholars worth summarizing its main points here. Essential to an understanding of the quoted passage is the physiognomy of the angel, seen against a storm that is "blowing from paradise", as Benjamin reminds us. The force of the storm propels the angel forward, and yet in a gesture of or attempt at resistance, the angel's head is turned back with mouth open and wings widespread. I would like to claim that the angel figured as such is what makes it associable with history, even though we don't know why the angel's mouth is left open, for example. It might be that the angel is screaming in reaction to what he witnesses, "the catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet", as Benjamin writes. If the figure of a forward-moving angel with head turned backward is an analogue to the ontological posture of the historian, another is the angel's desire "to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed", an impossible task since the storm has already lifted the angel up, "propelling him into the future to which his back is turned". Benjamin ends the passage with a reminder that, "this storm is what we call progress". Thus, eyes turned to the past, and

armed with the will to reconstruct the past out of memory and available evidences, factual and textual, Benjamin does indeed outline the main task of the historian. Central to this task is the messianic dimension of Benjamin's project that, interestingly enough, has the least passion for the future. Its main commitment instead is to rescue the past, that which might be essential for the formation of an image of the bygone totality that progress has smashed into pieces.

Read next to other passages, Benjamin's text maps both a vision and strategy of historiography that, in addition to defying the linear progression of history, also plots a discourse of temporality that is not homogeneous; highlights the anachronism involved in most cultural production activities; and puts forward a concept of time, now-time (Jetztzeit), that is pregnant with the revolutionary ethos of the past that is most often suppressed by the victors' version of history. Since the publication of Benjamin's text, historians sympathetic to Marxism and scholars affiliated with the discourse of the Frankfurt School, Frampton included, have appropriated Benjamin's vision of history. Frampton writes, "my affinity for the critical theory of the Frankfurt School has no doubt coloured my view of the whole period and made me actually aware of the dark side of the Enlightenment which in the name of an unreasonable reason, has brought man to a situation where he begins to be as alienated from his own production as from the natural world".⁵ Having this said, Frampton quickly reminds us that in spite of the fact that Marxist understanding of history influenced him, nevertheless, his book does not follow "any established methods of Marxist" analysis of history.

In addition to Benjamin's text, which supports the general outline of his book, Frampton also uses quotations from other prominent architects, writers, and thinkers for the remaining chapters of the book. We read, "I have endeavoured to use these 'voices' to illustrate the way in which modern architecture has evolved as a continuous cultural effort and to demonstrate how certain issues might lose their relevance at one moment in history only to return at a later date with increased vigour".⁶ This echoes, interestingly enough, a general Marxian understanding of modernity articulated by Harry Harootunian, among others. Harootunian writes, "All production immediately falls into ruin, thereafter to be set in stone without revealing what it had once signified, since the inscriptions are illegible or written in the dead language". He concludes: "beneath the historical present, however, lie the spectres, the phantoms, waiting to reappear and upset it".⁷ Nothing short of this quotation confirms the devastation caused by the wind of progress, which paradoxically secures the return of past architectonics in the form of kitsch against the transmissibility of tradition in now-time.⁸

Having established the above observations, interpretative methods, and influences, it is not farfetched to claim that central to Frampton's historiography are dichotomies such as tradition and innovation, metier and technology, but also site and material. Frampton reads these dichotomies through Benjamin's discussion of the loss of aura, and Martin Heidegger's *Building, Dwelling, Thinking* (1954). The critical implications of Frampton's juxtaposition of quotations from these two thinkers for the opening and closing chapters of his book could be the subject of another interesting essay. What should be mentioned in passing is that Frampton's appropriation of Benjamin and Heidegger hinges on a third figure, Hannah Arendt, specially her famous volume, *The Human Condition* (1958), which has influenced Frampton's oeuvre more than has any other contemporary thinker today.⁹

The two tropes Frampton draws from the discourses of Benjamin and Heidegger are technique and place, one born out of the spine of modernization, the other rooted in the most ancient and existential aspects of the life-world. Frampton pursues the impact of these two themes' uneven rapport with architecture in the light of the ever-accelerating temporality experienced in modern times. Frampton discusses the concept of place-making in reference to Heidegger and Benjamin's proto-phenomenological understanding of history. Disregarding their differences,¹⁰ what makes their conjugation plausible is their critical reflection on technology and time, which interestingly enough constitute the two major vectors of historiographies of modernism, Reyner Banham and Sigfried Giedion, for most. Unlike these two historians, Frampton neither aspires to technological determinism

(Banham), nor presumes a totalized experience of time and space as exemplified in modernist abstract painting, the architectonic implications of which are paramount in many historiographies of early modern architecture, Giedion's in particular. And yet, what differentiates both Banham and Frampton from Giedion relates to the strategy of periodization.

Departing from Giedion's tendency toward a holistic concept of history, Banham breaks down modern movement architecture into various thematic segments, each championing the work of one or two architects. Frampton radicalizes Banham's strategy, subdividing his book into three main parts, each a constellation of fragments wherein each chapter covers the work of a particular architect. The first two parts of Frampton's book explores the dichotomy between the cultural and the technical, as architecture enters (1750-1939) and exits (1925-1978) from the vicissitudes of the project of modernity, respectively. The taxonomy Frampton follows in the middle part of the book works like a historical construct on its own right (1836-1967): he rips objects out of their context, placing them in reference to an architect's interpretation of the two earlier suggested dichotomies. The anachronism informing the date of each part of the constellation that Frampton constructs defies historicism; it departs from the vision of history that tries to establish a totality based on one or two major principles i.e, organic (Bruno Zevi), and space and time (Giedion), let alone the totality perceived in analogy to the Marxian interpretation of capitalism (Manfredo Tafuri). Frampton's periodization of modern architecture instead conjugates the dynamics of time and technology with the geopolitics of place-making as architecture puts behind the historicity of modernism. This is an idea of periodization put forward by many theorists, including Jürgen Habermas in his famous formulation of the incompleteness of the project of modernity, a proposition Frampton is sympathetic with.¹¹

This much is clear from the last chapter of the first edition of Frampton's book, entitled "Place, Production and Architecture: towards a critical theory of building", in which he discusses post-war architecture in the light of technological optimization on the one hand, and the urge to recognize the existential demands of dwelling on the other. Starting with a quotation from Heidegger, Frampton departs from Benjamin to follow Heidegger's distinction between space and place-making.¹² The distinction, however, does not fault Benjamin's thesis on art in the age of mechanical reproducibility; it rather allows "crossing-over... between the categories of Marxist materialist explanation and those of Heideggerian ontology, which ascribes the age of modernity to the unfurling of the essence of technology".¹³ Such an understanding of technology turns out to be crucial to Frampton's theorisation of a semi-autonomous architecture, the thematic of which is, paradoxically, defined and redefined by the unpredictable path capitalism travels to smooth its own internal contradictions. As far as Frampton's project is concerned, we ought to ask, what is involved in discussing architecture in relation to the human condition, especially the idea of place making, at a time when capitalism has taken over the project of modernity? Frampton is aware of the total disintegration of the craft-based tradition of architecture, the loss of aura as the art of building encounters the instrumental logic of modern technology, and the impossibility of homologies once sustainable between the body, language, and landscape. Gone also is what Arendt coins the excess of labour when the latter is not yet fully absorbed into the production and consumption cycles of capitalism.¹⁴ Even though the consequences of these so to speak "negatives" for the art and architecture of the early modernism were reapproached by both revolutionary and conservative politics,¹⁵ Frampton has not yet given up the angel's potential mission in rescuing those aspects of the culture of building that might resist the current flood of commodification.

III

In what ways then are the generalities charted so far taken up in Frampton's introductory pages? Similar to the angel of history, Frampton's attention is focused on the past, especially the culture of building, without dismissing the natural flow of progress that has been at work since the Enlightenment, and this in conjunction with an experience of temporality that is not measured in terms of natural forces anymore. Frampton reminds his reader of the fact that the construction of the life-

world demands both formal and spatial solutions that are essential to architecture's rapport with the city and urban design, as history moves from the pre- to the post-Enlightenment appropriation of reason. This historical progression, which Frampton sees as the dark side of the Enlightenment, is enforced by a production system that is different from the pre-mechanical process of reproducibility when most construction materials were extracted from nature, and skills and techniques of embellishment were rooted in the crafts. Even though architectural production and reproduction have always used construction methods internal to their own historical development, this did not stop the art of building from sharing motifs developed in other cultural production activities. The vicissitudes of this Semperian position were transformed drastically as architecture entered into the production and consumption cycles of capitalism in which industrial technology over-determines transmission of those aspects of the culture of building that were not profitable both in terms of de- and re-skilling of labour, and the inevitable demand for using industrial materials and techniques. The implications of this process of reskilling for the work of art and architecture, as discussed in Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1934), is another topic that informs Frampton's introductory text. In the tradition of critical theory, Frampton believes that in addition to performing its purpose, technique sets up a particular movement and rhythm, the temporality of which, interestingly enough, coordinates the body's action and its relation to place. Recalling Heidegger, we could say that Frampton's criticism is focused on architecture's one-dimensional appropriation of technique, and this in spite of Benjamin's belief that the exhibition value of the artwork, a result of the infusion of the aesthetic of commodity fetishism into the cultural realm, will one day be integrated into the general way of the appropriation and the apprehension of architecture. No wonder then that the first edition of Frampton's historiography does not fully cover the aesthetic and formal consequences of what he would later frame as the "product-form".¹⁶

The introduction is also concerned with the beginning of the period of modern movement architecture. Here too, Frampton sees that the diffusion of industrialization and prefabrication into the production process of architecture not only transformed the culture of building, but also dissolved the Humanist perceived unity between architecture and the city. With the proliferation of positivistic and technocratic approaches to planning and built-environment, Frampton argues correctly that the split between "architecture and urban development has led to the situation in which the possibility of the former contributing to the latter and vice versa, over a long period of time, has become extremely limited". No wonder then that the two opening chapters of his book are dedicated to territorial and technological transformations that, interestingly enough, happen to be the core subjects of his critical interpretation of modernism in architecture, at least until the arrival of the postmodern moment. This interpretative regime not only structures the entirety of the first edition of the book, it also opens a particular vista onto what should and should not be included in the second part of the book. However, the introduction fails to provide detailed criteria for the inclusion and exclusion of architects explored in the main and the second part of the book.¹⁷ It is left to the reader to speculate how the work of the discussed architects relates to the specificity of the "subject under consideration" in each chapter of the book; how a particular design is "inflected by the given socio-economic or ideological circumstances;" and in what conditions the historian has restricted his analysis to formal issues. What we do know is that the exclusions concern projects that are motivated by the architect's own subjectivity - expressionism is one example among other omitted themes - instead of disclosing the ways external factors (the dichotomies mentioned previously) have influenced the design and its execution.

IV

As I was saying, the angel's physiognomy is positioned between the two moments of past and present. The temporal passage between the now-time and the past is inflected by what Benjamin coins the historical loss of the aura. However, he does not mark the timing of this historical unfolding, except by associating its occurrence with the age of mechanical reproducibility. This entails a concept of periodization that separates the classical age from the modern, presenting them as two major,

long-lasting periods. The posture of the angel of history also suggests that the time-now stands for Modernity, a *longue duree* event driven by the repressed dynamics of the past, and a perception of temporality that is tuned to technological innovation. Unlike Heidegger, Benjamin does not lament the loss of the classical comradeship between the body, place, and making, a constellation shaken by the rise of the instrumental appropriation of technology. Unlike the concept of the body foregrounded in phenomenology, the “anthropological materialism” attributed to Benjamin draws its conclusions from a “bodily collectivity” that is traceable in the realm of images, and from the bodily self-consciousness that is touched by technological development.¹⁸ These brief reflections on the body, place, and making are important because, among other things, techniques set up a particular movement and rhythm, the temporality of which coordinates the body’s action and its relation to place. According to Wolfgang Schivelbusch,

Pre-industrial traffic is mimetic of natural phenomena.... Only during a transitional period did the travellers who transferred from the stagecoach to the railway carriage experience a sense of loss due to the mechanization of travel: it did not take long for the industrialization of the means of transport to alter the consciousness of the passengers: they developed a new set of perceptions.¹⁹

Secondly, reading Heidegger through the pen of Arendt, Frampton foregrounds an understanding of the culture of building that is not yet reduced to its “lowest common denominator, in order to make production cheaper and to optimize use”. He goes further, suggesting that “In its well-intended but sometimes misguided concern to assimilate the technical and processal realities of the 20th century, architecture has adopted a language in which expression resides almost entirely in processal, secondary components” of buildings.

The aforementioned two poles of periodization, the classical and the modern, that underpin Frampton’s *Critical History* disclose the paradox involved in his own historiography: in order to exert its disciplinary autonomy, architecture in modernity has to stand against its context, that is, against the hegemonic aspects of the functionalist reduction of all expressive aspects of architecture to the exigencies of instrumental reason, as well as against the simulacra of postmodern historicism of the 1980s. It seems that, at the time of the publication of the first edition of the book, Alvar Aalto was one of the few architects whose work aspired to Frampton’s hope for reconciling the Miesian “obsession” with technology and the architecture of almost nothing.²⁰ Such a work is “patently ‘visible’ and often takes the form of a masonry enclosure that establishes within its limited ‘monastic’ domain a reasonably open but nonetheless concrete set of relationships linking man to man and man to nature”.²¹ Here Frampton tries to unpack the paradox permeating Benjamin and Heidegger’s positions on technology, which ironically demonstrates the subject’s importance for his own historiography of modern architecture. Benjamin’s problematic acceptance of technology as the engine of progress that has lifted the earthly-bound culture, tossing it into the orbit of relentless technological innovations, a landscape charged with the desire for nothing less than more consumption. Heidegger’s project, by contrast, is centred on the recollection of techniques that might turn his hypothetical spectator’s attention from the bridge (a technological spectacle) to the apartness of the two banks of the river.²² I would like to posit that it is the distinction between Benjamin and Heidegger’s interpretations of the loss of aura, on the one hand, and Frampton’s inclination towards Heidegger’s *Raum* and the loss of “nearness”, on the other, that led Frampton to compile his book as a constellation of various architects’ responses to the nihilism of technology, and the ways each try to recode the culture of building, major aspects of which belong to pre-modern times, in the first place.

V

Walter Benjamin wrote the “Thesis on the Philosophy of History” in the early 1940s, when the war had already demonstrated the atrocities that un-reason reasoning could commit under the guise of populist political slogans. With the election of Donald Trump to the American presidency in 2017,

although, interestingly enough he did not win the popular vote - it seems that the wealthiest, the so to speak "one percent", has now attained visibility in the emerging needle-type towers soaring up in Manhattan and other financial centres of the globe. The typological shift from the Heideggerian bridge - a horizontal construct - to the soaring thin towers says something about the political regime of architecture in the age of global capitalism. The year 2017 also witnesses Frampton's venture to add a new section to *Critical History*, the text of which primarily focuses on architectural projects produced in countries that have entered the process of modernization in different time capsules.²³ It is worth looking forward to seeing which architect's or thinker's statement will be quoted on the opening page of what is expected to be a critical assessment of the state of architecture in different cultures that, unlike "modern architecture", confront a state of production, consumption and appropriation of the cultural that is commodified and globally distributed. Whereas the quotation from Benjamin's text did not do violence Frampton's project as discussed in the short introduction to the 1980 edition of his book, the scope of the forthcoming quotations for the latest addition to the same book is important because the historicity of the "course of two actions", Mies vs. Aalto, that frames Frampton's project of historiography of modern architecture is transformed drastically. His critical take on "critical regionalism", however, remains promising. It maps the project of modernity and the culture of building beyond the centres identified with the dark side of Enlightenment. More importantly, it pursues a critical discourse of historiography in geographies the past and present of which are not synchronized with the temporality experienced in the western hemisphere, the classical vs. modern paradox, in particular.

Endnotes

¹ Walter Benjamin, "One-Way Street," in *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings* vol. I, 1913-1926 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 481.

²https://www.google.com.au/?client=safari&channel=mac_bm&gws_rd=cr&ei=etSzWOWhOIQB8wWQgLWACA#channel=mac_bm&q=constellation+meaning&*&hl=en Downloaded February 10, 2017.

³ Giorgio Agamben, "The Melancholy Angel", in *The Man Without Content* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 104. The essay's chapter title recalls A. Dürer's engraving, *Melencolia*.

⁴ "My wing is ready for flight, / I would like to turn back. / If I stayed timeless time, / I would have little luck".

⁵ Kenneth Frampton, *Critical History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1980), p. 9.

⁶ Kenneth Frampton, 1980, 9.

⁷ Harry Harootunian, *History's Disquiet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 19.

⁸ Giorgio Agamben *The Man Without Content* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 111.

⁹ This subject is discussed in Kenneth Frampton, "The Status of Man and the Status of his Objects" in Frampton, ed., *Modern Architecture and the Critical Present* (London: Academy Editions, 1982), 7-19. This issue of *Architectural Design Profile* was published on the occasion of the publication of Frampton's *Critical History*, 1980.

¹⁰ On this subject see Howard Caygill, "Benjamin, Heidegger and the Destruction of Tradition", in A. Benjamin and P. Osborne, eds. *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1994), 1-31.

¹¹ Jurgen Habermas, "Modernity- An Incomplete Project", in ed. Hal Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic*, 3.

¹² In France, during the late 1930s, Martin Heidegger's discourse opened the door to seeing in "phenomenological dialectic" the entire business of the Marxian philosophy of history. Alfred Schmidt, "Henri Lefebvre and Marxism: A view from the Frankfurt School", <https://thecharnelhouse.org/2017/02/10/henri-lefebvre-and-marxism-a-view-from-the-frankfurt-school/> downloaded February 11, 2017.

¹³ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2006), 31.

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1958), 88.

¹⁵ See for example, Maria Gough, "Tarabukin, Spengler, and the Art of Production", *October* 93 (summer 2000): 76-108.

¹⁶ The subject is discussed in Kenneth Frampton, *The Evolution of 20th Century Architecture: A Synoptic Account* (New York: Springer Wien, 2007), 123-136.

¹⁷ The consequence of these exclusions for the "linear" quality of history is discussed in Manfredo Tafuri's review of Frampton's book. See Tafuri, "Architecture and 'Poverty'", in Kenneth Frampton ed.,

Modern Architecture and the Critical Present (London: Architectural Design, 1982), 57-58. [Should be consistent about where/how you indicate an edited book.]

¹⁸ I am paraphrasing John McCole in *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 172. The author makes these claims based on Benjamin's remarks on "Experience and Poverty". For a comprehensive exploration of Benjamin's concept of "experience" see Andrew Benjamin, "Time and Task: Benjamin and Heidegger Showing the Present", in ed., A. Benjamin & P. Osborne, *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience* (London: Routledge Press, 1994), 216-250.

¹⁹ Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Railway Journey: The Industrialisation of Time and Space in the 19th Century* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1986), 15. Also see Sigfried Giedion, *Mechanisation Takes Command, a contribution to anonymous history* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948).

²⁰ One year after the publication of *Critical History*, in discussing "regionalism", Frampton extended the list of architects to include Alvaro Siza and Mario Botta, among others. See Kenneth Frampton, ed. *Modern Architecture and the Critical Present*, 77-83.

²¹ Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture*, 10.

²² I am paraphrasing my own reflections on Martin Heidegger's concept of dwelling in Gevork Hartoonian, *Modernity and Its Other* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1997), p. 49.

²³ This issue came up in the author's recent conversation with Kenneth Frampton.