

PHILOSOPHY AND ARCHITECTURE
FILOSOFIA E ARQUITECTURA

Nas nuvens também crescem raízes

Even in clouds roots are born



Edited by Constantino Pereira Martins

Coord. Constantino Pereira Martins



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In memory of

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8. Vítor ALVES

Singularities of the mirror

With the theoretical background provided by Jacques Lacan's text "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience"⁸⁸, this paper explores the possibility of construction of the architect's self in confrontation with an "other", reflected on the pages of a specialized publication.

Since the 1970s, the connexions between architecture and the media, especially the printed one, have been extensively explored. In this specific universe, the work of Beatriz Colomina and the way she interprets the published images as ideological instruments⁸⁹, is particularly relevant. For example, in her 1994 book, *Privacy and publicity*, Colomina examines how Le Corbusier manipulated the photographs of his Villa Schwob, built in 1916 and published in the 6th issue of *L'Esprit Nouveau* magazine (1921), in order to produce or emphasize a particular argument. These images have been tampered to underline very specific formal qualities: by removing the pergola, some vegetation and the landscape itself, the building depicted, because detached from the place which it belongs, acquires a more autonomous, purist and ideal character.⁹⁰ One could say that the manipulation of these representations, anticipates, on the printed page, something that only would be fully accomplished with Villa Savoye in 1929.

However, this example is also useful to clarify an argument that Colomina presented a few years earlier in her essay "Architectureproduction" (1988), where she states that: *As in Lacan's famous analysis of the "mirror stage" of psychological development, the printed media provide for Le Corbusier both a turning point and a moment of constitution of his architectural "self"*.⁹¹ In this brief sentence, Colomina equals the printed page with the Lacanian mirror, assigning to the paper sheet the same effects of the specular image. She points out that, unlike the classical conception of the mirror as an instrument that reproduces an imitation of an original and already constituted self, *Lacan posits that the mirror constructs the self, that the self as organised entity is actually an imitation of the cohesiveness of the mirror image*.⁹² Nonetheless, Colomina does not consider this to be an exclusive of Le Corbusier, claiming that:

⁸⁸Lacan, J. (1995), "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience", in *Écrits: A selection*. London: Routledge, pp. 1-7. The final version of this text was delivered at the 16th International Psychoanalytical Congress, in Zurich on July 17, 1949, and published in the *Revue Française de Psychanalyse*, n° 4, October-December, 1949, pp. 449-455.

⁸⁹Jannière, H.; Vanlaethem, F. (2008) "Architectural magazines as historical source or object? A methodological essay", in Sonin, A., Jannière, H.; Vanlaethem, F. (eds.), *Architectural Periodicals in the 1960s and 1970s*. Montreal: IRHA, p. 51.

⁹⁰Colomina, B. (1994), *Privacy and publicity: Modern architecture as mass media*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, pp. 107-111.

⁹¹Colomina, B. (1988), "Architectureproduction", in Rattenbury, K. (ed.) (2002), *This is not architecture. Media constructions*. Oxon: Routledge, p. 213.

⁹²*Idem*, pp. 213-214.

[...] anybody actively involved with publishing is familiar with this experience. The printed media are the mirror wherein the bits and pieces of one's writings and work (often unrealised) return miraculously to their author in a "complete" image. The exhilarating effect on one of the press is not unlike the jubilation of a six-month-old baby in front of a mirror.⁹³

Despite of the unexpected but intriguing analogy between the construction of what could be called the "architectural self", or "architect-I", and the psychoanalytic perspective of the formation of the "I", Colomina mentions nothing more on the subject.

The "mirror stage" belongs to the "imaginary", one of the three constituent dimensions of the human condition and psychoanalysis (the other are the "symbolic" and the "real"), the one that deals with images – those that exist and those that are formed, whether they are real or virtual. The text's object is the alienation of the "I", a kind of fundamental fiction, occurring before any social determination, regarding the individual's relationship with his own body through his *identification* with an image. Although Lacan uses the example of an eighteen-month-old baby to illustrate how the "mirror stage" is a crucial moment in the child's mental development and representative of the essential libidinal connection with his body, he insists on highlighting that it also reveals *an ontological structure of the human world [...] in which the "I" is precipitated in a primordial form*⁹⁴ and defines the *ideal-I*. Meaning that the "mirror stage" is not a phenomenon that occurs at a certain stage of the child's development, but a kind of permanent structure of human subjectivity. The mirror, in addition to being the first moment with oneself, through a specular image that is an "other", also illustrates the conflict character of the I/other attachment as an insuperable condition of the individual.

The experience of the mirror provides the child with a sense of body unity that does not find correspondence in his proprioceptive experience. The lack of motor coordination, the inability to control his own body or the *fragmented body* sensation, are opposed by the perception of a body unity (the mirror image) that amazes him, but that can already recognize as his own. In other words, it is the identification with the specular image unity of a total formed body (a *Gestalt*), that causes strangeness and generates anguish, by grounding the constitution of the "I" on the illusion of an image that can never correspond to its faithful reflection, for it forms a subjectively non-existent unity. Therefore, and according to Lacan's description, the operation that allows the constitution of the "I" is the same that condemns it to a condition of alienation, shaped by the identification experience of the mirror image as an external and discordant image, suggesting a harmony contrary

⁹³*Idem*, p. 214.

⁹⁴Lacan, J. (1995), *Op. Cit.*, p. 2.

to the uncoordinated sensation experienced by the child's body. Hence, one can understand the *Gestalt* as the way by which the human being anticipates the maturation of his power in a *mirage* that gives the "I" its rigid and alienated structure. What this experience also allows us to realize is that what constitutes the "I", even though it's an image of oneself reflected in the mirror, is always something that comes from the outside, by the presence of an "other".

It is the encounter with the specular image, in front of an image of harmony and coherence, an "ideal-I", and regardless the inability to control his own body, which allows the child to experience the jubilant sensation that resides in the hope to overcome this lack of coordination, anticipating at a mental level the ability that has not yet mastered at the physical level due the triumph of the "imaginary" dimension.

Thus, it is understandable how the "mirror" articulates the relation between the human being and the environment in which he operates. The fact of being born without the ability to dominate his own body and the difficulty in establishing connections with the surrounding context, presents to the child as an obstacle to overcome. It is this gap, the *primordial discord* in Lacan's words, which the image in the mirror aims to solve as a mediator between the organism and the world through the creation of the "ideal-I". In this way, the "I" is revealed as an essentially paranoid instance, since its origin is external to the individual, at the same time that is marked by the aggressiveness that the whole identification process entails, since it highlights the lack of real unity with which the individual rivals. The identification process means acquire to the "I" the characteristics of the "other", to take his place and, eventually, deny his existence. Accordingly, the relation with the "other" is always an ambivalent one, both erotic and aggressive.

In *Privacy and publicity*, Beatriz Colomina draws attention to the fact that for Le Corbusier *architecture is a conceptual matter to be resolved in the purity of the realm of ideas, that when architecture is built it gets mixed with the world of phenomena and necessarily loses his purity.*⁹⁵ However, Colomina argues that this effect is reversed when the same built object is published, thereby returning to the world of ideas.⁹⁶ Consequently, printed images, rather than representing buildings, present ideas. Faced with the impossibility of accessing the built work through a printed page, when publishing architecture (in its different representations: text, drawings, photographs, etc.), what is being published is an ideal (an imaginary set of perfections – the ideas – which cannot be fully realized). In the universe of publications, more than the dissemination of a particular object, is the dissemination of its idea and its different meanings. In this sense, it is possible to situate this conception of *idea* as close to the *Gestalt* notion as Lacan describes it (in the form of a specular image of harmony and coherence with significant totality).

⁹⁵Colomina, B. (1994) *Op. Cit.*, p. 114.

⁹⁶*ibidem*.

The energy of “The mirror stage” lies not only in creating an image of oneself, but in its instrumental use; when establishing a productive relation with the image, it is possible for the child to see the impact of his movements. Similarly, it would be possible, through the publication as a mirror, to perceive the extent of the author’s thoughts and their impact on reality. It is the existence of the mirror that leads the child to make a number of new gestures, to interact with them, to perceive the effects of these movements on the mirror image and the reflected environment. Equally, in the case of specialized publications, is its existence which calls for new “movements”, the creation of new discourses, while the creation of new knowledge justifies the existence of the publication itself. Publications are the space where new ideas are translated into texts, images and projects, where their effects can be seen and the impact they have on the reflected environment: both on the authors (the reflected child’s image) and on the people and things around them (the reality that the mirror duplicates). An architectural publication, as a mirror, functions as a *virtual complex* and the *reality it duplicates*; it does not belong to the world of phenomena, but it is a reality in itself, a virtual reality.

The child, during the struggle that occurs to master his own body, uses props, human or artificial, which allow him to overcome his difficulties (to stand or walk, for example). It is through other elements, which do not belong to the individual’s own organism, that he is allowed to understand his potential. But for these potentialities to be fully achieved, they have to be recognized as tangible realities – realities provided by mirror images. The same effect will be possible to recognize in the case of publications. The printed work provides their authors with the same *mirages* of tangible realities. This effect is perhaps more intense in the cases of unrealized projects, which is often a sufficient reason for its existence (once published, will it be really necessary to build it since it always falls short of its “pure idea”?). It is through the published “props” of the architectural work that individuals are allowed to believe in the tangible reality (considering the drawings, texts, images, models and other devices that represent the project as “props” since they allow access to the unbuilt object, in the same way the walker allows the child to walk, even if he cannot master this ability⁹⁷).

There is an *identification*⁹⁸ with the image on behalf of the author who believes that is through the publication that the real becomes possible. And this “assuming an image” is crucial for the transformation of the author to take place. It is in this sense that Colomina speaks of *jubilation*, in the same way that Lacan describes the experience of *jubilation* felt by the child in front of the

⁹⁷“Unable as yet to walk, or even stand up, and held tightly as he is by some support, human or artificial (what, in France, we call a ‘*trotte-bébé*’), he nevertheless overcomes, in a flutter of jubilant activity, the obstructions of his support and, fixing his attitude in a slightly leaning-forward position, in order to hold it in his gaze, brings back an instantaneous aspect of the image.” Lacan, J. (1995), *Op. Cit.*, pp. 1-2.

⁹⁸“We have only to understand the mirror stage as an *identification*, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image – whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytic theory, of the ancient term *imago*.” *Idem*, p. 2.

mirror. Faced with the (specular) image of harmony and coherence – the “ideal-I” – provided by the publications, authors are allowed to experience joy, which is nothing more than the recognition on them the power to master an ability that they did not believe it was viable (yet). To identify with the published image is to (fully) believe in the possibility of that reality – they are that reality. But, despite the jubilant sensation, the identification generates both a sense of anguish and strangeness, as this experience provides the author a disagreement with his own reality. Through the identification process, he recognizes himself as the author of that “ideal-I”, at the same time he is not sure if he is (since the “ideal-I” is an “other” outside the individual). Hence the reason for his anguish, generated in the precise moment before the choice with which to identify, when he is pure possibility, but where there is also no possible choice other than his identification. Although he can never take his place, he is his referent, his complete double, but precisely for this reason, a strange one. That is why Lacan describes these mirages as forms imbued with significant totality (*Gestalt*) to be *more constituent than constituted*⁹⁹. Therefore, as the “mirror” is a key element of the *Ego* constitution, publications would also be fundamental, although not exclusively¹⁰⁰, in the construction of the “architect-I”.

The publication of a particular work allows its architect-author an opportunity to confront himself with an image that can provoke contradictory feelings. The fact that what is published is its author, and this is the way others see him (including himself), can result in the need, sometimes obsessive, to control what is represented since there is a risk of not recognizing oneself in what is printed. Hence the “struggle” for the place where authors can build their “I”, since what the publications allows is not only a moment to produce a statement, but an opportunity for architects to be recognized, an opportunity to exist, transforming the printed page in a place of desire. A desire that is nothing more than a particular form of identification: a temporary fixation of a certain image that the author seeks and assumes, territorializing the object of his desire. But this not mean that identification works in a linear manner, on the contrary, identification is an ambivalent place (it can produce certain desires as it prevent others) and in constant negotiation between what it incorporates and what it rejects. It is essentially an articulation process, a continuous and never complete construction; rooted in contingency, it is always below and beyond its referent, also incorporating what is constitutively different. This insinuate, the existence of multiple and parallel identifications by the individual, producing conflicts, convergences, dissonances and new configurations, which call into question the unity and stability of the “I”.

99“The fact that the total form of the body by which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power is given to him only as a *Gestalt*, that is to say, in an exteriority in which this form is certainly more constituent than constituted, but in which appears to him above all in a contrasting size (*un relief de stature*) that fixes it and in a symmetry that inverts it, in contrast with the turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him.” *Ibidem*.

100Strictly speaking, this formative effect is not exclusive to publications, but it can also occur in other media (radio, television, exhibitions, conferences), or on other platforms where someone’s work is presented as an “image of harmony and coherence”. However, in the case of specialized publications, this effect seems evident.

Nevertheless, this process does not occur only in those who are published. It is likely that the same identification effects exist on architects other than those who publish, since they share the same type of “body”: both are architects, have the same academic education, the same type of production, belong to the same architectural culture. Like the mirror, as a physical object, is not essential for the identification process (it is the device that illustrates it), likewise, for the construction of the “architect-I” to take place, it is not necessary to have published work, just the identification with what is published.

The reader always accesses what is reproduced on the printed page in an incomplete way, either because of the difficulty in providing all the information necessary for its understanding, or because of the impossibility of transmitting, for example, through a representation on a two-dimensional support, a three-dimensional reality. In this impossibility, the reader, when imagining the object, unconsciously fills the information gaps in order to be able to form a complete and coherent image.¹⁰¹ In doing so, he invests something of himself in the published element, transforming it. Departing from the printed page, it is always another object that is built. In a way, it is at this precise moment that the reader, when mentally building the object, becomes its author. The published works are thus invested with an affection that enables the identification by readers, believing now they have the ability to produce objects like those too. Therefore, in the case of readers, it can be considered a similar process to the effect that the “ideal-I” has on authors when their work is published. In other words, what is published allows both authors and, with the same degree of intensity, readers, to believe that they can also be producers of that reality. Meaning that this process potentially causes the same referent to produce different effects depending on each careful reader, that is, variations of “I’s” that are based on the (supposed) same “ideal-I”.

But publications, especially periodicals, are not made through dissemination of a single object or a single author. While identification with an image can lead the reader to identify himself with the author of the published object, increasing the erotic/aggressive relation, the identification with the images of various objects and authors can lead to the creation of a new “body” or a multiplicity of “I’s” in the same “body” – hybrid bodies as a result of combination and blending of various authors or objects. Faced with the *primordial discord* between the organism and its environment, the individual, when confronted with his *insufficiency*, relies on the *anticipation* of the abilities of “others” as a mechanism to relate to reality, as a kind of *armour* that covers the body as Lacan calls it. This breach, between organism (*Innenwelt*) and reality (*Umwelt*), as Lacan says, will never be perfectly restored, which is why it *generates the inexhaustible quadrature of the ego’s*

¹⁰¹The imagination’s ability to fill information gaps in order to give meaning to images, and the viewer’s investment in the observed object, is noted by Pedro Bandeira when he refers to Bernard Voïta work, particularly in the collection of photographs entitled *Architectures* (1994) where the artist, using objects he collects from the trash, builds models of places that do not exist, but that in its apparent banality, are easily recognizable as common places. Half of these images are constructed with scale models and the other half completed by the viewer’s memory and imagination who, without much effort, identifies pieces of cities in these works. Bandeira, P. (2007), *Arquitetura como imagem, obra como representação: Subjectividade das imagens arquitetônicas* [PhD thesis]. Guimarães: Departamento Autônomo de Arquitectura da Universidade do Minho, p. 28-29.

*verifications*¹⁰², in an always impossible attempt to be in harmony with its natural reality again. It is the separation of these two entities that allows the individual to build his own (denaturalized) body. The body is thus constituted as a form, with its limits defined and contained in a surface (the mirror), that which is capable of receiving the projections of the individual. Consequently, Lacan establishes a morphology of the body on which *ghosts* (the idealizations) can be projected, placing the (*orthopaedic*) body-image as a totality at the control core of the “I” endless constitution. This means that the body’s specular image does not represent any pre-existing biological or anatomical body (to be true, it would have to be a fragmented one as experienced by the child), but an extremely plastic, contingent, artificial and constructed form.

Considering this possibility, the conditions are created for the individual, and the architect, to be several or, in other words, for the components of the constructed *armour* to be able to come from several authors, or for there to be several *armours* mixed according to the readers-authors unconscious, poured over the form circumscribed by the body limits.

102Lacan J. (1995), *Op. Cit.*, p. 4.

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Diogo Ferrer
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