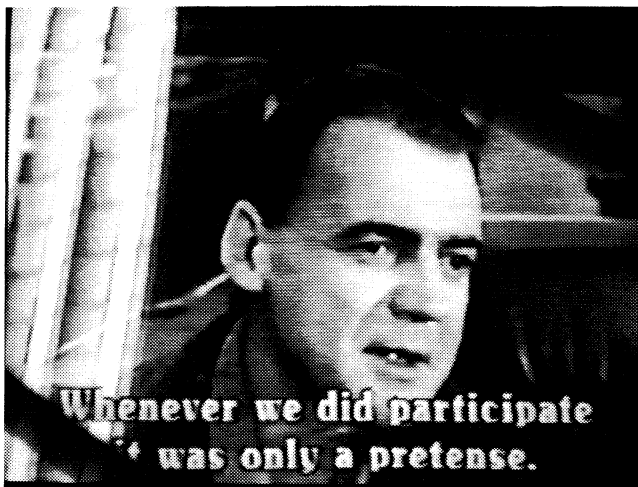


Wrestling with Angels: On Berlin

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"The city is, in its structure and architectural form, the expression of the political life and the national consciousness of the people"

—"Sixteen Principles for the Restructuring of Cities,"
East German Ministry of Building, 1950¹

CAPITAL

The short S-Bahn ride from Zoo station to the Ostbahnhof only hints at the scale of the lost opportunity that is the development of Berlin after unification. The train first passes the new government buildings along the Tiergarten and near the refurbished Reichstag. These structures are mostly clumsy attempts to reconcile a monumentality that is deemed necessary for the rejoined nation with an understandable national reluctance regarding the monumental. This struggle is exemplified by the Chancellery, a gigantic decorated diagram with the urbanism and scale of Albert Speer's plan for the grand axis of Nazi Berlin. The domed Reichstag itself has been converted by the office of Norman Foster to emit the sort of techno "high-shine"²³ which they are now marketing. Its massively expensive display of sustainability is rhetorical at best. The macabre



James Bond orange-squeezer dangling over the parliament chamber seems too blatant a reminder of the pressure put on that body by modern history.

The ride next offers a long passing view of the equally gargantuan private-sector development around the memory of Potsdamer Platz to the south of the government center. Here, less than fifteen years ago, Wim Wenders made much of *Wings of Desire*, the epitaph to the urban void. The void itself had become the essential figure of post-war Berlin and, by extension, of the Cold War epic in general. The movie dwells on the powerful emptiness of the space between east and west that had been Berlin's bustling mercantile center before 1945. It may be a perverse nostalgia that clings to such gaps within the apparent closure of the urban figure-ground, but that nostalgia is insistent and this void's eventual transformation makes it doubly so. Since the making of the film, this resonant emptiness has been filled by a colossal fantasy. While the presumption may be that these huge buildings represent an expression of civic space at the Prussian scale of the capital, a new core to join others that serve the dispersed city, in fact it seems a generic act of macro-economics in the late-Twentieth-Century sense. The fantasy is finally that of the developer. Despite its scale, Potsdamer Platz could be anywhere that real-estate values can be crossed with demographics then properly factored against ambition.

“And so it goes. It is at this point, amid the noise of construction, that he declares himself fully alive, and hence ready to die. Even in the dark his vision and energy go on thriving; he goes on striving, developing himself and the world around him to the very end.”
—Marshall Berman writing of Faust⁴

The new Potsdamer Platz is an example of a global phenomenon, of the simulation of the urban in new ensembles that do not invite the heterogeneity nor the chaos that have traditionally characterized actual cities. But this is not necessarily terrible. In fact, it is both inevitable and can be invigorating, adapting to changing cultural conditions. “Faust’s unfinished construction site is the vibrant but shaky ground on which we must all stake out and build up our lives.”⁵ Nonetheless, at the ideologically delicate center of Berlin, such configurations seem imagistic or worse.

Inside Hans Scharoun’s exceptional post-war library, part of the fine ensemble that includes his Philharmonie and Mies van der Rohe’s National Museum, Wenders’ *großvater* meditates on the transformations accomplished, and losses suffered, in the modern era. He then wanders the derelict space around the building searching for the Potsdamer Platz. At the time of the making of the film, it did not seem possible that the non-site of his reflections would become another victim of the passing century. Wenders’ whispering absence is now gone. While Renzo Piano produced the finest works in this indifferent conclave (the towers that hold either end of the enormous development) his other building (the casino at the heart of the ensemble) imitates the adjacent Scharoun library, a building that is so insistently unique, so dramatically an object, that imitation is homicide. The saddest result of the Potsdamer Platz development has been the trivializing of the existing. The mediocrity that now towers over it has diminished the very good architecture of Mies and Scharoun, that group of spectacular, if formally contradictory, post-war structures that formed a Western response juxtaposing contrived culture (literature, art, music) to the East German gesture of paradoxical containment that eventually became the Wall.

Potsdamer Platz serves current ideology more than actual practical concerns, paying homage to politically mandated “ecological” concerns with flashy surfaces that are unlikely to work in the quasi-steppe climate of Berlin. At the Sony Center dual glass skins contort elaborately around this gigantic panoptical structure. Technologically flashy hardware gives the correct impression of luxury and environmental sensitivity. In a formula of current value, it is the pyrotechnics of technique and lavish material that matter. From Helmut Jahn this is not surprising. This is the architect who introduced decorative towers into the sublimely muscular extrusion of the grid that had been the recognized design standard of Chicago. All architects, from Louis Sullivan and Daniel Burnham to Raymond Hood, Mies van der Rohe and Gordon Bunshaft, had respected the city’s diagrammatic formats, producing a varied yet extraordinarily coherent expression of the American landscape extruded vertically. Unlike his fellow-countryman Mies, Jahn did not adhere to the house rules of this intense metropolis. He imposed a series of late-Modern and post-Modern decorative skins on towers in the city center, opening the door for the imported confections by KPF,

Bofill and others that have reduced Chicago to the status of another corporate terrain. Now Jahn returns to the new-old German Capital. His State of Illinois Center is imported to Berlin as the Sony Center. To invite Jahn to Berlin is to anticipate such a product. What is more surprising is that the other better architects who have contributed to the Potsdamer Platz seem to have lost their bearings in the fog of capital and scale prescribed by the site.

After a few seconds the train stops at Friedrichstraße and offers a view down the commercial axis with its new decorated blocks. Glittering edifices adhere to the 19th-century-profile that is currently required by the fast-changing ordinances that have made Berlin a study in urban fashion. A militant vehicular culture (here I include bicycles) in Berlin tends to resist the ambulatory life implied by a boulevard in the first place. Furthermore, the *flâneur*-friendly avenue that was promised is compromised by passages that link the buildings on their interiors forming a continuous shopping mall parallel to the relatively empty *straße*. The sprawl and weather of the city seem to dictate an urbanism closer to Toronto than to Paris, an urbanism in which the automobile will remain the predominant form of transport and promenade, augmented by interior malls like those that make the street itself redundant.

The train then passes the Alexanderplatz with its social-realist scale: vast terraces and arcades are to make way for more blocks and towers of the neo-boulevardian sort already evident in the Mitte. As on Friedrichstraße, this is another episode in the city-wide scenario dedicated to imposing a nineteenth-century image of the city on a twenty-first century culture. Berlin was the crucible of urban modernity and has less reason than most places to mourn the passing of history and more reason than most, given its scale and national position, to generate new urban configurations. Nonetheless, Alexanderplatz sits like a prisoner on death row. The appeals seem to be all but used up if they have been filed at all. And with the two Hans, Kollhoff and Stimmann, as prosecutors the defense probably has no chance. In fact, the socialist development of Alexanderplatz seems a good starting point for densification, for a pressurizing that would suit the dynamic nature of the new German-European capital. Stalinist urbanism, the excesses of scale and material that redefined Eastern Europe and Asia after World War II from Karl Marx Stadt and Leipzig to Vladivostok and Beijing, should not be condemned wholesale. In the less wealthy nations of the east their augmentation will be inevitable and exciting. In wealthy Germany, eventual erasure threatens to be total. As they replaced those of National Socialism, the gestures of state socialism will be themselves replaced by the nostalgia and cuteness of late-capitalism. While the Dutch or Spanish are frenetically redefining urbanism and accommodating change, the powers in Germany and particularly the planners of Berlin seem intent on inventing a sentimental history of dubious value for a society that desires the opposite and conducts its affairs in an extremely progressive way.

The train arrives at Ostbahnhof. In a few minutes the problems of German city planning, and by extension, of modern architecture in Germany, have been surveyed. It is not just this little bit of Berlin seen in the few minutes it takes to circumnavigate the old city



center that confirms the problem of development in the recovered capital. Its entirety is marred by urban directives, thousands of new buildings and the reconfigured image of the sutured city. This flawed attempt to eradicate the history of division produces a homogeneity - nostalgic and is implicitly conservative. The body was too badly blown apart to be reassembled anyway. In fact, this analogy is not entirely appropriate. While the dismembered human body is only a site of pain, medical research or fiction of the *Frankenstein* genre, the dismembered city is the shape of new, often exciting, urban developments. Mexico, Houston, metropolitan Paris and Barcelona: such urbanisms promise an alternative to the often anachronistic formulas embedded in the city seen as a totality. In fact, formulas of urban reassembly are not only champion the status quo but often both physically no longer viable. The dismembered city may be the living city while the whole has become moribund or redundant. As in the drawings and paintings of Georg Grosz, it is only the mutilated and incomplete who can traverse the metropolis. And now it is not just a phenomenon of war-damage or urban blight that produces mangled urbanisms. Many cities begin and thrive in an apparently deformed state. Furthermore, the operations of reconnection underway in Berlin will at best produce a mutant replica of the 19th-century city, a heady nostalgia for which seems to be determining civic choices. And Berlin is an unlikely candidate for such nostalgia. It is more a case of *Body Snatchers* rather than *Frankenstein* anyway. The difference between these two modes of horror is central here. Frankenstein is a bewildered assembly of actual human parts. The body snatchers are frigid replicas, superior to the flawed complexity of the human they replicate. The pathos of Mary Shelley's monster is not there in the replicants that have become the paranoid standard of current science-fiction. Such ultra-humans are but the latest confused symptom of the Pastoral. A simpler individual supplants the intricate and flawed citizen. Flesh is replaced with something more perfect. The danger of this form of monstrosity when addressing urban history is obvious - "body snatching" at a metropolitan scale - the new Potsdamer Platz.

Shelley warned that the reassembled body can be very destructive, even patricidal. The body-snatcher can be even more so. This seems to be the result of planning in Berlin. The bourgeois recreation of the historical city romanticizes Berlin after the Industrial Revolu-

tion, actually an overcrowded apotheosis of wage-slavery. Any argument that this 19th-century city was a healthy one seems to be a pure example of "operative criticism" of a most extreme sort. Always, as the New Urbanist recreations of a fantasized public realm in America have made evident, such simulations serve conservative political aims. The political implications of a call for "return" cannot be avoided wherever the typological results of this sort of Pastoral exclusivism appear, whether in Seaside, Beirut, or Berlin. To go back, no matter however superficially or inaccurately, is still to go back.

"Cities in and of themselves neither 'come into existence' nor 'exist' as such."

"Sixteen Principles for the Restructuring of Cities" 1950'

The root problem may be the almost purely political intentions of all phases of reconstruction in Berlin, IBA included. More than most, this city was and is literally the manifesto of changing dogma. A continuous history of reification makes the place both fascinating and tragic. Planning was driven before unification by the Cold War market ideologies in the West and Stalinism in the East, highly symptomatic at the level of idea and disappointing at the level of urbanism. The most compelling force in this process has been the thrust of triumphant late-capitalism encouraged by the Christian Democratic era which began altering only half the metropolis but managed, after unification, to transform its entirety. While politics and ideology are always the engine pushing the vehicle of urbanism in the case of Germany and particularly Berlin, the vehicle is more like a dragster, its huge engine attached to a spidery and endangered cultural superstructure.

CONTRADICTIONS

In the midst of this disappointing landscape certain structures distinguish themselves. The program of Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum extension, of such emphatic "otherness," may automatically have freed the museum from the constraints that hobbled so many of its counterparts in the city center. But Sauerbruch/Hutton's GSW Headquarters on the Koch Straße has no such reason for being better than the rest. The architects simply resisted the prescriptions of urbanists and political image to produce a rich metropolitan statement. Perhaps more amazing, given its location and authors, is the Gehry office's dg Bank in Pariser Platz. The facade facing Unter den Linden is a study in reductive architecture rendered in glass and stone. The constraints of a position on the central axis of the old city and so close to the Brandenburg Gate seem to have revived the quality of the architects' former work. Perhaps the prescribed profile and language of the great street have given the Gehry office back what they so clearly have abdicated for the sake of sensationalism. The glass cocoon inside the dg Bank reiterates the basic outlandishness that lurks behind the hard walls of this very cosmopolitan city. It is much more successful than the same gesture at the reworked dome of the Reichstag or Jean Nouvel's pointless cone at the Galleries Lafayette on Friedrichstraße. Disappointingly, the bank's rear facade is an at-

tempt to refer, in a graphic manner, to the image of the Eastern European city. Its contorted pattern of dormers seems more suitable to a '20s German-Expressionist film, *Doctor Caligari* or Poelzig's sets for *Der Golem*, where the figure of the contorted town evokes state of mind and culture for the brief instant of its filmic projection. The architectural image is more permanent and will tarnish badly over the years, like television advertisements seen too often or billboards left up past their impact.

Of course it would be impossible to catalogue the thousands of architectural works built or projected for the new Berlin. With the exception of those noted above, the great majority appear to be mediocre. As stated, this is at least partially the fault of civic authorities and the constraints they have leveled on construction. The attempt to impose a romantic vision of the 19th century pedestrian city on a very modern one seems as misguided as the IBA attempt to impel a pleasingly generic post-modernism. The simultaneous authoritarian imagery encouraged by the latest group of planners under Hans Stimmann, its dour rationalism, is simply out-of-place in this exuberant and heterogeneous capital. In some of the projections of Hans Kollhoff's office, most notably the early renderings of the Alexanderplatz project, this vocabulary seems to reach a state of sublimity such as to return it to the quality of his office's early work, especially the fantastic projects for Altanpole in Nantes of 1988 and the Ethnological Museum of Frankfurt of 1987 as well as his fine built housing in Amsterdam and Kreuzberg, Berlin. But it has to be assumed, as in their other recent work, that this neo-expressionist promise will be stultified when built. Kollhoff seems to have made a conservative choice that has certainly brought him projects and power, but has renounced the potential of his work when he had neither.

Berlin is one of the crucibles of Modernism. Buildings from the 20's by Mendelsohn, Scharoun, the Tauts, and many others, juxtapose to



the largely 19th century fabric, exemplified by Mies' 1921 rendering for the Friedrichstraße tower - the intentional collage of streetscape, tram lines and dark facades with his crystalline construction. The rebuilding after the Nazi period produced another

batch of extraordinary projects. Again those of Scharoun and Mies stand out, but are only symptomatic of general quality. But the new work in Berlin seems to evoke the period between early Modernism and the experiment of the post-war social democratic era, the urbanism of the Nazis and their chosen language of neo-classicism. The 30's did produce some very strong work in Berlin. Tempelhof Airport and the Olympic complex of stadiums are particular examples. But generally the Nazi period produced questionable urbanism and neo-classicism that was reprehensible in its historic implications. Why this has become the statute of current development is a question that should be asked in Germany. The post-war directives for both the eastern and western sectors of the city and nation, driven as they were by various degrees of social realism and modernist progressivism seem finally so much more effective for this particular place, its scale and position with the unique amalgam that is modern Germany. Not surprisingly, by 1954 the *existenzminimum* prescriptions coming from Moscow and the force of urban capital emanating from the West, began a tragic dismantlement of the early promise of reconstruction on both sides of what was to become the Wall.

During the last decade, Germany has been unfortunately caricatured by the struggle between glass and brick. Of course, this is a gross generalization of an architectural culture that is far more intricate. But, like all such generalizations, there is a certain directness to this perception of the post-unification. And architecture, despite the fact that it is infinitely rich as a discipline, or maybe since it is so rich, tends to reduce, almost into cliché, the philosophical criteria that it adopts. Architectural theory tends to scavenge associated disciplines for a few forms to bring back to a design culture with an insatiable appetite for novelty. Architects tend to reinvest those forms with significance in a field of reference in what Celeste Olalquiaga describes as a field "Free from the restraints of a fixed referentiality, signs can travel openly through the circuits of meaning, ready to be taken up or left arbitrarily, connecting in ways that were previously unthinkable."⁷ The best German practitioners have avoided the simplistic issues that attach to materials and the predictable solutions that derive from what it primarily an imagistic response to the conservative urban dictates that brick materializes and the neo-liberal clichés embodied in the use of glass.

While work is formal, as all building design must basically be, it also engages culture at least partially in the realm of economics and methodology. This is a good place for the ideas pertinent to architecture to go, for the endless mining of ideology for the scraps of form that it implies is a relatively fruitless operation. On the other hand, ideas finds a much more direct and comfortable connection to many of the other aspects of architectural making. This is particularly true of those that address how buildings are made and what forces are served by their making. Here the connections are implicit: political in the richest sense of the word, philosophical in a particularly engaged way, analytic in depth and material in implication.

“There is no abstract scheme for urban planning or for determining architectural form. The embracing of the essential factors and demands of life is decisive here.”

“Sixteen Principles for the Restructuring of Cities” 1950⁸

Contemporary work in Berlin is also constrained by national concerns. The Green Party demand for sustainability seems to mostly lodge in image at this point except at the level of quotidian and inexpensive housing initiatives. With the Republic at the helm of the European Union, the desire to both celebrate and downplay the power that comes with this role, especially when it pertains to redefining the historic capital of a nation with a short but very tempestuous history, also tends to send mixed signals to designers. Likewise, the amnesia and progressivism that history has induced and the struggle for identity that such amnesia will always generate on a national level, a struggle which seems to suggest a backward view of those so decidedly headed forward, also makes for a difficult field in which to operate. Architects can only go so far in blaming others for the loss-of-nerve represented by their embellishment of the capital. This problem also derives from the romanticism with which most designers confront Berlin. Indeed, the city divided, the city of fragments, the ruinous picturesque, “the pastoralism of war,” the insistent avant-guardism of the place, the sheer enormity of it, the Wall as metaphor and metonym: all these are seductive. But to produce something profound, these easy and anachronistic readings must be factored against new developments. Berlin is all these things, as *Wings of Desire* perhaps best stated, but it also a quotidian big city, another and an “other” city at the same time. Paris, Barcelona, Milan, London, the Rotterdam-Amsterdam corridor, the Ruhr with its continuous field of cities: many European urbanisms confront the same issues in potentially more extreme circumstances and with more committed responses. But Berlin is also the capital of the post-war psyche as such. It is the place where that German discovery of the value of alienation, the invention of the modern by Goethe, Marx, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Benjamin, and a host of others, is most clearly expressed. The city is split still, unresolvable, caught between east and west in a way no unification can resolve. East-Berliners remain *untermenschen*. A Russian wind blows down its Parisian boulevards. Film may finally have been the best medium to address the impossibility of closure that this city embodies, but architecture must, in its antiquated and slow way, likewise respond to the issues and connotations of this amazing metropolis without nostalgia for the city’s painful development or a misguided utopian desire to eradicate the very productive results of that development.

Of course, the development of Berlin affects all quarters of the vast metropolis and projects of quality are hidden away in the existing sprawl of the city and are rising at its edges. The ambassadorial residence in a quite southern suburb or the school, Gymnasium Walterdorfer Chaussee, in Gardenstadt Rudow by Dirk Alten are good examples of smaller less stentorian work of extreme intelligence and quality. In fact, it may be here, far from the gargantuan scale and monumental implication of the centers of east and west, that the sort of action that makes good work can more easily occur. In the midst of inconclusive German battles: brick vs. glass, 19th

vs. 21st century space, “green” vs. late-capitalist development, architects like Sauerbruch/Hutton and Alten seem to have kept their heads, to have registered the values of these various discussions without succumbing to the superficial imagery they imply and which has damaged so much recent German production. In the work of these young designers, a balance of concern with form as a matrix for ideas, and a continental if not global point-of-view that derives from experiences outside Germany,⁹ have generated vital architectural expressions in the troubled giant (ex-Chancellor Kohl seems a perfect metonym) that is Germany after its painful and messy reassembly.

Most architecture of the last decade in Germany seems to have succumbed to the contradictions inherent in the ideologies of the period and to have reduced to extremely elementary stylistic strategies the responses to those ideologies on an architectural level. Some, on the contrary, apparently profits from the same contradictions, through a multilayered set of formal and symbolic reactions. This may be the key to this practice, and possibly to strong practices in general. They develop a “rapid response” capability that, in what may appear to be paradoxical actions at various levels, can generate rich combinations of formal reactions to the various and complex conditions that characterize modern production. Layered design formats, ranging from the most progressive, to those that at first appear almost kitsch, that range from the literary, through the technical and economic to the historical, can thus face in a way that is neither simplistic nor predictable, what Gramsci calls the “manifestations of the intimate contradictions by which society is lacerated.”¹⁰

ARE YOU READY TO RUMBLE?

This essay began with a discussion of the context in which German practice is set: both the physical paradox that is Berlin and the ideological turmoil that is modern Germany. The former is mostly disappointing but the latter has to be perceived as at least as exciting as it is troubled. More than in most places, in Germany cultural context has to be presented at least simultaneously with any individual’s work. The place is even less of a vacuum than the engaged and compromised realm that architecture usually finds itself addressing. Possibly this derives from a self-consciousness stemming from the history of the last century, but it is also simply because Germany will always put issues and production through philosophical scrutiny, will always develop a perspective that is ideological. This, after all, is arguably the place where more significant modern thought has been generated than any other in the West. Germany simply will always filter material through the sieve of ideology. This can lead to a detachment that is demonstrably dangerous, but it also produces a critical field that has been more intense than almost any other. In Germany angels look down on all action. And they descend regularly to grapple with form. It is an exciting but intimidating field for the practice of architecture. This may partially explain why the nation hasn’t developed the same preeminence in the current architectural discourse as Switzerland, Spain or the Netherlands. The constraints are often too tight, defin-

ing symbology and determining planning initiatives. Germany is a ring where the lights are bright and the angels strong. A handful of architects have not won as much as thrived where so many have just gesticulated or capitulated.

How has this happened? The answer is not simple. In fact it is its complexity that matters. As stated, architects must manage to function on multiple methodological levels simultaneously. This essay has tried to clarify some of these simultaneously functioning formats, but they finally will not link together into a seamless endeavor. Then again, the culture addressed architecture cannot be assembled seamlessly either. Work must reflect the complex field it wrestles with. Finally, and historically, architects will continue to engage in a mimetic practice making unique things.

How little are the things with which we wrestle

What with us wrestles, how much greater is!

If only we would let ourselves be conquered

as things overcome by a great storm,

we would expand in space and need no names...

Whoever was defeated by an angel -

and often one decided not to fight -

left walking proud and upright, full of strength,

and greater still for having felt the power...

Rainer Maria Rilke¹¹ Beirut, spring 2000

NOTES

¹Directive from the East German Ministry of Building, 1950, as published in *Architecture Culture 1943 - 1968*, ed. Joan Ockman (New York: Columbia Books of Architecture, Rizzoli, 1993) p. 127

²Wenders, Wim, director, screenplay in collaboration with Peter Handke, 1987

³Reyner Banham used this term in a lecture on Foster I attended in the late '70s at MIT. As with many cultural phenomena, Banham seemed almost clairvoyant in predicting the trajectory of Foster's practice. At the time, with the very interesting high-tech projects for Willis, Faber and Dumas in Ipswich and the Sainsbury Art Center at the University of East Anglia behind him, Foster was moving toward the imagistic mechanism that has characterized his later work. The Hongkong Bank (1979-86) seems to have been a turning point in this direction. As with Los Angeles, Modernist theory, or whatever he turned his skeptical but enthusiastic gaze toward, Banham's insight was exceptional.

⁴Berman, Marshall, "Third Metamorphosis: The Developer" in *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982) p. 71

⁵Berman, Marshall, "Epilogue: The Faustian and Pseudo-Faustian Age" op.cit. p. 86

⁶Directive from the East German Ministry of Building, 1950, op.cit. p. 127

⁷Olalquiaga, Celeste, in *Megalopolis: Contemporary Cultural Systems* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1992) p.21

⁸Directive from the East German Ministry of Building, 1950, op.cit. p. 128

⁹Both Alten and S/H worked and taught in England and with OMA.

¹⁰Gramsci, Antonio, "Historicity of the Philosophy of Praxis" in *The Prison Notebooks* (New York: International, 1971) p.404

¹¹Rilke, Rainer Maria, "The Visionary" from *The Book of Images*. 1906