

Architecture, Experience and Visuality in the Digital Age

AMY MURPHY

University of Southern California

INTRODUCTION

Akin to Anish Kapoor's big red *Marsyas* installation stretching across the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern, digital technology is 'stretching' the practice of architecture in two directions. One could argue that they are the same two directions all architectural representation has always pulled us before: simultaneously towards that which transcends the real as well as towards that which is ever more real or tectonically true. The digital realm encourages us to dream beyond our current limits as well as to act as super human calculators thereby repositioning current limits. (Gomez, 377) What is astonishing is not that we now have to reconcile these two directions, but the *extent* to which we are being stretched.

This paper argues that in order to reconcile the relationship between digital media and contemporary architectural experience, as well as to strengthen the connections between the real and the unreal, one has to develop a deeper understanding of visuality and the contemporary subject who ultimately engages a work of architecture. It is precisely our act of vision and subsequent cognition that has always acted as the common 'glue' between the immaterial and material realms.

To make this argument, the paper looks at several theoretical positions regarding subjectivity and spatial engagement. From this historical mapping, a comparison emerges between two contemporary positions, one being Anthony Vidler's notion of 'warped' space and the other being Hal Foster's idea of the 'split' subject. Both try to articulate the new condition of the subject in today's global and digital world, yet each offers a unique reading in terms of the potential consequences of this new situation on artistic or architectural formal strategies. The paper ultimately uses these two positions to analyze and compare the work of Zaha Hadid and Rem Koolhaas (most particularly their own submissions for the IIT project in 1998) as a way to see how the post-modern subject is being considered today.

THE MODERN SUBJECT AND VISUALITY

At the onset of early Modernism, there was great hope that the advent of new media technology would liberate us from the detached un-empowered subject of the classical perspective paradigm in all works of art including architecture. Exalting in 1935 about the potential of the film and other emerging art forms to break the perspective paradigm, Walter Benjamin writes:

Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling. With the close up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. (236)

Ultimately, Benjamin (along with filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein and others) hoped that through the nature of such experience, a new relationship between art and the observing subject would be established, one which would resist the tendency of bourgeois art (and its rituals) to control the subject through the act of contemplation and surrender.

In the politics of this new art, Benjamin imagined a way that media would provide not an escape from reality for the masses but instead provided a means to resist the fascistic tendencies of culture that placates the populous with entertainment (and ultimately war), in order to keep the basic property values and class distinctions in place.

The greatly increased mass of participants has produced a change in the mode of participation... Distraction and concentration form polar opposites which may be stated as follows: A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it...In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs

the work of art. This is most obvious with regards to buildings. Architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction. (239)

Benjamin continues by arguing that an art that provides such a distraction can tackle cultural and social problems that are often left ignored and act as a means to mobilize the masses.

Yet when such techniques of Modernism were eventually appropriated by the dominant political and economic infrastructure and were not used by the masses as a means of resistance as desired by Benjamin, a paradoxical and almost opposite effect of alienation emerged as the common reaction of the subject in space. As Richard Sennett writes in regards to late Modernist architecture:

The International School was dedicated to a new idea of visibility... Walls almost entirely of glass, framed with thin steel supports, allow the inside and the outside of the building to be dissolved to the least point of differentiation... In this design concept, the aesthetics of visibility and social isolation emerge...the public space is an area to move through, not be in...When everyone has each other under surveillance, sociability decreases, silence being the only form of protection..." (15)

The replacement of Benjaminian social action in a state of distraction with an intense paranoid awareness and silence in urban experience is just one way in which the project of Modernism was disemboweled of its noblest intentions.

Many early Post-modern practices were clear attempts to move beyond some of these exhausted strategies of Modernism by re-engaging the human subject back into the experience of architecture and art. These techniques were more often than not both diverse and contradictory, whether it was through populism (via Venturi), nostalgic iconography (via Stern), the poetic inscription of memory (via Rossi), etcetera. Some architects 'reverted' to a pre-modern relationship to the subject (restating contemplation and the mystique of historical/ritualistic aura), while others tried to move from Modernism and salvage some of the fundamental/optimistic aims of subject engagement: while still others used this period to express the nihilism, built on a type of Wittgensteinian logic of 'what is torn is torn,' about the loss of the subject following the atrocities of the 20th century.

THE POSTMODERN SUBJECT AND VISUALITY

Yet the terms of these attempts all changed significantly once again with the introduction of electronic/digital media. As Marshall McLuhan exclaims in his 1967 manifesto, *The Medium is the Massage*:

The Renaissance Legacy. The Vanishing Point = Self Effacement

The Detached observer. No Involvement!

The viewer of Renaissance art is systematically placed outside the frame of Experience. A piazza for everything and everything for the piazza.

The instantaneous world of electric informational media involves all of us.

All at once. No detachment or frame is possible. (53)

Here we can sense the return of the Benjaminian desire for the engaged subject who has cracked open the hegemony of the perspective paradigm, who has erased the distance of contemplation, and who is propelled into a state of social action by stepping *into* the frame, thus obliterating the frame's dominant presence between the world and the subject. Following the logic of this desire, technology has ironically tried to give us a way to re-emerge into a more collective reality (I am thinking of the Reality TV boom, internet chat rooms etc).

Yet, through this collapse of distance between the spectator and reality, there can be more often than not a resultant lack of critical consciousness on the part of the subject, thereby leaving the subject open to dominant forces without recourse, as made clear by the writings of Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967). Though chronologically concurrent to many of the writings of McLuhan, Debord seemed to predict more accurately that this new digital infrastructure and visual media were prone upon delivery to be enlisted by the existing hegemonic forces rather than to offer a means of resistance or change. As Debord is quoted, "(The) spectacle consumes criticality under distraction, and the dialectic of distance and closeness becomes an opposition of real separations concealed by imaginary unities (i.e. dominant cultural myths)..." (Foster, 220)

IN LIGHT OF THIS HISTORICAL TREND, IT IS HARD ON OUR PART NOT TO REMAIN WHOLLY CYNICAL REGARDING THE EFFECT OF MEDIA TECHNOLOGY ON THE SUBJECT.

Yet, as we progress and as digital media becomes even more embedded into the everyday in more and more ways, even the fatalism of Debord seems to be too one sided and does not take complete stock of the total effects of the digital culture as we have now come to know it. Instead, I believe that we are in a new type of 'repositioning' stage in terms of this debate architecturally, a rich period for both the intellectual and the architect to question how work should address the presence of a contemporary post-modern subject and the terms of his/her interchange with a particular urban or architectural situation.

In terms of theory, there have emerged two interesting models for thinking about the current condition: the 'warped' subject as

proposed in the writings of Anthony Vidler and the 'split' subject as put forth in the work of Hal Foster. Each writer moves from a common reading of the modern scene (i.e. the writings of Benjamin and others). Yet, as their analysis begins to address the present, they find themselves with different interpretations in terms of the nature of the subject in space. In many ways the distinction between the two writers lays in their more precise interpretation of the subject's and our own relationship to Modernism.

For Vidler, we are not in necessarily a new place but a *changed* place with the arrival of the digital dimension. The Modernist project is still active but is being 'warped.' Citing the presence of 'modernist genealogy' in much of current architectural practice, he states:

(This contemporary work shares) a common concern for space albeit defined in an entirely different manner from that of the first avant-gardes...while distorting the traditional space of modernism and questioning the equally traditional fiction of the humanist subject. The results in each case, theoretically or in design, have been the production of a kind of warping which I have called warped space. (vii, Preface)

Vidler suggest that while digitalization has 'altered' the way we look and are looked at in space, we remain operating within the same type of 'perspectival cast' that is standard to the general Western European tradition.

From the beginning of the century, the apparently fixed laws of perspective have been transformed, transgressed and ignored in the search for to represent the space of modern identity...The vocabularies of displacement and fracture, torquing and twisting, pressure and release, void and block, *informe* and hyperform that they developed are still active today, deployed in work that seeks to reveal, if not critique, the conditions of a less than settled everyday life. (1)

From this point of view, Vidler's research gathers the 'tracings' of general psychological and artistic ruptures that become manifest in our 'warped' cultural artifacts such as architecture.

Foster also doesn't suggest a full distinction between modern and post-modern practices but sees them in a simultaneous relationship rather than a warped one. For him the closest spatial diagram to describe this arrangement is that of 'parallax'.

I believe modernism and postmodernism are constituted in an analogous way... Each epoch dreams the next, as Walter Benjamin once remarked, but in so doing it revises the one before it. There is no simple *now*: every present is nonsynchronous, a mix of different times; thus there is no timely transition between the modern and postmo-

dern...In this regard modernism and post modernism must be seen together, in parallax (technically, the angle of displacement of an object caused by the movement of the observer), by which I mean that our framing of the two depend on our position in the present and that this position is defined in such framings. (207)

Foster extends this parallax metaphor to his interpretation of our current cultural effect on the subject.

For Foster, the subject today is being *split*: split by our current relationship to previous ideologies and split by the potentials of technology. We are often both here and in full consciousness and there and in the imaginary; we are often both contemplative and distracted. The dualities of technology are both benign and invasive; the body is both immaterial and physically marked (by gender/race etc...); the post-modern subject is both full of fear and fantasy.

This wiring connects and disconnects us simultaneously, renders us both psychotechnologically immediate to events and geo-politically remote from them; in this way it subsumes both the imaginary effects of spectacle in Debord and the nervous networking of media in McLuhan." (222)

Reciting an anecdotal story concerning his bodily reaction to the spectacle of watching the Persian Gulf War, when his subjecthood was affirmed by the destruction of other bodies, Foster confesses to the "paradox of disgust undercut by fascination, or of sympathy undercut by sadism; and a splitting of the body image, the ecstasy of dispersal rescued by armoring, or the fantasy of disembodiment dispelled by abjection. If the postmodern subject can be posited at all, it is made and unmade in such splittings." (222)

HADID/WARPED VERSUS KOOLHAAS/SPLIT

For me, as one begins to relate these readings of the post-modern to architectural practice, it is not about making a choice or position for or against Vidler or Foster. I believe *both* notions are at play in the production of architecture today. Taken to their potential, both paradigms suggest a place for subject to establish a critical relationship to the work whether it be via a more phenomenological effect of the 'torquing' or the cerebral effect of 'splitting'. And in many ways, I would argue, that the distinction found between Vidler's interpretation of the post modern subject and that of Foster's suggests a similar distinction between Zaha Hadid's architectural work and that of Rem Koolhaas. These two architects are particularly interesting to look at in terms of the proposed state of post-modern subject today and his/her relationship to urban life and architecture.

In terms of relating to the chronological points of the paper, it is not only interesting that these two architects come the same place in terms of their early development (the AA, Hadid worked for a short time for Koolhaas etc.), but that both in many ways are part of a generation of architects deeply effected by the events of the 60's, particularly that of 1968. I think there can be a distinction made between generation of architects such as Koolhaas, Hadid, Nouvell, etc. and those of the 'previous' generation (Foster, Gehry, and Siza) in terms what they as architects expects of the subject's relationship to their work. This later generation IS the generation of McLuhan and Debord, where the engagement of the subject was in many ways the point of the unrest and the optimism of the cultural revolutions. For the previous generation, it might be argued, the most consequential event was 'heroic' period of WWII in terms of the architect's own deeper ideological development. This is not to say that the subject is not considered in Gehry's, Siza's or Foster's work, as no one would argue that. But that subject when viewing such work is envisioned to react with a type of phenomenological awe rather than becoming cognitively engaged.

In the work of Hadid and Koolhaas, on the other hand, there is a different underlying presumption, an inherent optimism that the subject can be moved *beyond* pure awe and actually become activated in the Benjaminian sense. I would argue that in the much of work of these two architects, the subject is considered as a primary agent in the unfolding and the existence of the work itself. The building is not considered complete until the subject engages it, and the event has 'become.'

Yet beyond these similarities, there are significant distinctions in terms of how these two architects relate to the subject, and especially in light of the discussion regarding Vidler and Foster above. On several levels, I would argue that Hadid's work is akin to the warped space issues discussed in Vidler's writings, while Koolhaas' work most closely addresses the split condition as deciphered by Foster. And for the sake of this paper, it is best to contain this comparison to their individual responses to the competition for New Campus Center at IIT in Chicago in 1998.

In terms of Hadid's proposal, she states clearly that it was her intent to take up on the 'unfinished' agenda of the Modernist project. Yet, hers is not a wholesale acceptance of Modernism, as she is careful to make distinction between those modernist ideals that have become atrophied (zoning and modularity) and others that have yet to find their full potential (cubism, suprematism and neoplasticism). I think her distinctions between these categories is further testimony to her interest in a active subject as the former issues (zoning/modularity) are void of any attention to subjectivity while the later are about the work's effect on the cognitive subject as a representational practice.

In the project, Hadid blended these concerns with significant new conditions not present during early Modernism in her overall formal strategy:

Our daily life cycles are less stable and less standardized today... Events and event spaces are less rigidly typified today. The realms of work, learning and leisure intersect. Informal communication becomes an ever more important condition for the furtherance of science, disciplinary boundaries begin to blur and the institutions like IIT become – like our personal and professional identities – more fluid and complex. (54)

It is through these new issues that she begins to 'warp' any direct or derivative relationship to Modernism itself, aware of its effect on the original spatial syntax.

The subtle symmetries of the plan continue to be broken by slight slippages, resulting in arrangements reminiscent of neo-plastic compositions. The spaces in-between often allow for multiple readings contradicting the axial and hierarchical set up. Also the actual lived space of the campus seems much more open and ambiguous than the original formalism suggests. (55)

As articulated in the early study models of the project, it seems like the Miesian ground plane begins to literally warp, torque and emerge as a formal spatial response mediating and articulating the new conditions of the post-modern subjects as they come to interact in space and with each other.

Koolhaas' response, on the other hand, is not at all about promoting the continuity of modernist space. Nor is it about its disavowal either. In essence the architectural strategy is one that connotes the 'splitting' of the subject between two historical and spatial paradigms. With the skewering of the original Miesian plan with new infrastructures of movement, the plan begins to literally create a type of parallax as identified by Foster. Through the diagonal movement against the grain of the Miesian grid, the subject is put in continual friction or juxtaposition with the original plan. The 'then' and 'now' are situated in a constant and relentless dialogue. For Koolhaas, this pattern gets the project to a closer representation of the larger cultural reality of today; for Koolhaas, the "positioning each programmatic particle as a part of a dense mosaic, our building contains the urban condition itself... We're not trying to emulate the current mess. We are just interested in the sublime." (Becker interview)

In the end, I would argue that Hadid is more sympathetic toward the paradigm of 'warped' space rather than that of the 'split' subject because Hadid's work itself is much closer to the immediate trajectory of modernism. And as a result, she conceptually constructs the subject as one that is more *universal* (more akin to the type of international style tenden-

cies of the early Modernists). In looking at her complete body of work, she refers to contemporary post-modern issues, yet there is a similarity of formal strategy regardless of program or location. Koolhaas on the other hand sees the world not as universal but as *global* in nature – with the consequences being a subject that is always here and there, in the past and the future, conditioned and conditioning the urban experience through our own diversity and multiplicity. The work tends to be much more about its specificity to the Contemporary rather than to the Modern.

When asked in the same interview about the intense graphic and digital campaign deployed as the visual language of his architecture at IIT, Koolhaas states:

I think that is kind of in a way a response to globalization, I think when IIT opened, you could probably assume that everyone would feel very welcome in a highly abstract space such as Crown Hall...I think that if the current generation enters a building like that they feel a weird absence of information. Given the fact that the student body is now literally from at least four or five continents, it felt very important to try to develop a language of fundamental information that is effective in these circumstances.

In direct contrast, Hadid's visual language is one lacking in iconography and reference to the digital per se and based more on material choice, thereby setting the buildings up as a type of conceptual mood ring which gets re-described by the psychological state of the viewing subject and the daily patterns of light and weather. These aesthetic distinctions, I believe, suggest that each author holds different opinions on what is fundamentally the best strategy to engage the contemporary subject. In many ways, these differences of opinion parallel a well-established debate in cinema.

Historically, there has always been a binary relationship between those film directors who advocate a Bazinian approach of the long take as a means to better engage the subject versus those films/directors who embrace the Eisensteinian montage effect of the edited cut. Where the former tries to arrive at a type of subject involvement through a single *mise-en-scène* that plays out in real time, the former employs montage to advocate an engaged and cerebral subject that is active in the construction of meaning. To some extent, I believe Hadid more closely represents the Bazinian approach of the long take (albeit with steady cam rather than the theatrical single shot); while Koolhaas tries to engage the subject through a more constructed effect of discursive elements whose meaning is brought to life or *assembled* by the viewing subject. Ultimately, these aesthetic effects sets the level of didacticism in regard to how explicit the architects want to be about our contemporary cultural condition and its relationship to language (digitized or otherwise articulated).

Nevertheless, whether implicitly in Hadid's work or explicitly in Koolhaas' work, the subject is left to not only understand the phenomenological position of his/her body in space (a modern condition), but is required now to understand or question his/her position relative to coordinates much more international/global in proportion (a post-modern condition) at the same time.

CONCLUSION

The historical trajectory of the subject into the post-modern and digital condition offered here is often ignored when people attempt to make a connection between film, media and architectural production today. The relentless citation of Benjamin's desire, McLuhan's optimism, or Debord's fatalism in many written works remain anachronistic or at least incomplete by not acknowledging the profound alterations that have occurred in our culture since these texts were written. I believe that both Foster's and Vidler's work brings us more up to date and addresses more closely some of the distinctions and complexities in contemporary architecture.

While one could argue that one interpretation (that of Hadid/Vidler or Koolhaas/Foster) is more correct, the relevancy of both suggest in their unison that the Modernist project has not finished but significantly **CHANGED** by the presence of digital culture on the conceptual, spatial as well as the technical level. The work of Zaha Hadid and Rem Koolhaas offer very different interpretations regarding the relationship between visuality and the engagement of the subject. But both works acknowledge the need to provide 'critical distance' for the cognitive subject as well as pleasure in experiencing the work itself. In light of other strategies put forth to cope with this changed world, I find their work inherently optimistic in regards to *stretching* the architectural practice in order to mediate the world for the postmodern subject, be it warped or split.

It is true that this paper only deals with the effects of the digital condition on the built environment and not on the purely cybernetic realm, but this omission might be read as a critique in and of itself. As Alberto Perez-Gomez writes, "The goal is hardly to pursue the dream (or nightmare) of our dissolution into networks of digitized information; it is rather to construe and build spaces that resist such a collapse." (382)

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