



## OBLIQUE ARCHITECTURE, ORNAMENT AND THE SEARCH FOR ORIENTATION IN TEXT

### ARQUITETURA OBLÍQUA, ORNAMENTO E A PROCURA PELA ORIENTAÇÃO NO TEXTO

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#### **Abstract:**

In the following I would like to argue that the Baroque period was the first and last completely autonomous epoch since the beginning of so-called modernity. The Baroque period brings to fruition those conditions which were formulated by the Renaissance for such a modern age but it does so in a surprisingly unfettered and innovative way. Before I try to define this Baroque period, I think that it is essential to briefly sketch the contribution of the Renaissance to the Baroque formation of concepts.

**Key words:** Baroque; Renaissance; Architecture; Modernity.

#### **Resumo:**

Neste artigo gostaria de defender que o período barroco foi a primeira e última época completamente autônoma desde o começo da chamada Modernidade. O período barroco traz à fuição as condições formuladas pela Renascença para a tal era moderna, mas o faz de uma maneira surpreendentemente inovadora. Antes, porém, tento definir este período barroco, o que é essencial para brevemente esboçar a contribuição da Renascença para a formação barroca dos conceitos.

**Palavras-chave:** Barroco; Renascença; Arquitetura; Modernidade.





In my view the Renaissance stands out in particular for its radical transformation of perception and of the related models of orientation. I see this transformation as being brought on less by changed political or weltanschauung conditions than by a change in media. In the Renaissance *ARCHITECTURE* overtakes *TEXT* as a primary imago of cognitive and mnemotechnical strategies of orientation. Whereas the mnemotechnique of antiquity grounded its definition of locus as the basis of images to be memorized on the primacy of the architectural or spatial representation<sup>1</sup>, locus came to signify *CHARTA*, paper<sup>2</sup>. What had been only a metaphor for the mnemotechnique of antiquity - i.e., that places are not just spaces but in a sense sheets onto which the imagines are attached or mounted like letters - is gaining general validity in the Renaissance. The new orientation in text, however, demanded adequate campaigns to retrain memory to smoothly adapt to the new central imago. The challenge was, above all, to reinvest the feats of architecture - the functions serving to define structure and form systems - with as little loss as possible. The sacral and public dimension of architecture had to be assumed by text, as in none of the mnemotechnical manuals are private or other - usually unknown - buildings mentioned. Text had to stand in for the old monumentality of architecture, that is, in its own way to both condition and stimulate memory. In the search for the optimum text which could meet such demands two types of text became the center of interest. Their specific nature

<sup>1</sup> "Constat artificiosa memoria locis et imaginibus. Locos appellamus eos, qui breviter, perfecte, insignite aut natura aut manu sunt absoluti, ut eos facile naturali memoria comprehendere et amplecti queamus: ut aedes, intercolumnium, angulum, fornicem et alia, quae his similia sunt." *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, lat.-germ., ed. Theodor Nüßlein, Darmstadt 1994, p.166

<sup>2</sup> The author of the "*Rhetorica ad Herennium*" metaphorizes in a second approach the "locus" as a "carta": "Nam loci cerae aut cartae simillimi sunt, imagines literis, dispositio et conlocatio imaginum scripturae, pronuntiatio lectioni", *ibid.*; the renaissance commentators and mnemotechnicians, for instance Cosmas Roselli, Nicolas Chappuy, Lambert Schenckel, Hieronymus Marafiotus, Romberch, Alsted - use to stress the carta - option to figure the locus.





attracted considerable projections on what was intended to be the new tasks of text. These two text types were: Hebraic script and hieroglyphics<sup>3</sup>. Both were apparently able, by virtue of their multi-dimensional meanings and the “deep semantics” inherent in them - to simulate, or compensate for, the complexity of spatial models of order - *modo scripturae*. A “spatial deprivation” was inevitably given by the primacy of text over architecture. It was redeemed (and congenially compensated for) by the depth effect provoked by a ciphered text surface. There where the surface, i.e., the mnemonic charta, appeared to be MORE than it, where one could assume that there were entrances to the hidden spaces of meanings, text was the competent heir of older figures of order coordinated on the basis of spatial axes.

“Ecquis autem eò pretiosores INGENIOSARIUM INSCRIPTIONUM, quàm pictarum Imaginum reliquias esse neget; quò divinius est Illustrium Vitarum Animos aeternis consignare literis, quàm externis Corpora pigmentis adumbrare? Nam si Pictura elinguis Mima, humanos tantum aestus indicat; Picturae vocem eloquium tradit Elogium (...) Inscriptio statuas erudit; triumphales animat Moles; ingeniosa Sepulcrorum Marmora cum Viatoribus confabulari docet; ac felici Calamo, veluti fatali Hermetis Caduceo conclamators Heroum Manes è Libitinae manibus eripit: nam ille demum omnino mortuus est, qui Elogio caret.”<sup>4</sup>

“Even if someone denies that the remainders of ingenious inscriptions are more valuable than painted imagery, (I would like to argue) it is all the more divine to designate

<sup>3</sup> see U.Eco: Die Suche nach der vollkommenen Sprache, München 1994, especially Chapter 2 (Die kabbalistische Pansemiotik) and Chapter 7 (Die vollkommene Sprache der Bilder)

<sup>4</sup> D. EMMANUELIS THESAURUS COMITIS et maiorum insignium Equitis INSCRIPTIONES quotquot reperiri potuerunt (...) Emmanuel Philibertus Pancalbus (...) Romae sumptibus Blasij Diversini & Felicis Cesaretti 1667, f. A 5 r





the spirit of illustrious lives with eternal letters than to depict the body with external color. Even if painting is a silent emulator, it indicates human movements. Eulogy, however, lends painting eloquence (...), the inscription forms statues. Triumphant inscriptions animate (dead) matter. The ingenious marble of funerals shows how to begin a conversation with a wanderer. And with an auspicious feather or with the fateful rod of Hermes, it tears the manes of heros out of Libitina's hands: for he is, finally, dead, he who lackst eulogy."

I believe that architecture was not fully overtaken by text (nor was it able to be) but that in the Renaissance the general tendency was their crash or collision. What speaks in favor of such a collision or heightened competition are the strange torsions that the theoretical constructs of the time tended to reveal<sup>5</sup>. This phenomenon could, in broad terms, be subsumed under the heading of "textualization of space". The consequences of the described collision can, of course, be most clearly observed within the realms of the media involved, i.e., architecture and text. The deformations and transformations, the changes in the plan of elements should be seen as the immediate effects of a radically changed notion of perception. What the Renaissance facilitated as such a collision served as the motto for the introitus in the Baroque age. What the Renaissance had critically called into question and viewed as an issue that had to be reformulated was worked out and somehow petrified by the Baroque. In any case, we see the Baroque age emerging as an enormous laboratory, in which efforts were directed at fabricating objects on the basis of a primary orientation in text.

<sup>5</sup> The *analysis situs*, the *ars combinatoria*, and even the invention of the differential calculation by Leibniz could be considered an echo of the challenge resulting from the collision.





I would now like to examine the Baroque age within the colliding fields of architecture and text in such a way that the mark left by text becomes visible in architecture and, by the same token, the mark left by of architecture becomes visible with its outlines in text.

### 1) On Architecture

Parallel to the boom of text there was the boom of the eye as “its” organ, that is, as the organ of reading. The organ of architecture, however, was not just the eye but the body. More precisely: the peripatetic body, the body in discourse. Architecture was apparently nothing other than the first “body-machine”, the first spatial symbolization of the body and its acts of orientation<sup>6</sup>. When the architecture is drawn to the horizon of textuality, then it largely loses, as can be easily understood, the character resulting from its original embodiment, but without being immediately completely done away with. Spatial concepts under the sway of the idea of text will, however, become manifest in a radically different way that the corporeal spaces did. The primacy of the optical, the new principal role of text and vision implies, and entails that the differences between what is illusionary and real space are increasingly blurred, that precisely the handling of the surface which makes something more than, or different from, itself becomes the central task of artistic preoccupation. The experienced reader only needs the peep-show view, the gaze into the theatrum. In any case it must be a gaze capable of recognizing its “MORE” as depth effect on stimulating surfaces and accordingly to carry out the

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<sup>6</sup> To ground this thesis I would like to focus on the treatises on architecture say Vitruvius or even of the Hindu and Buddhist architects who equate the proportions of the human body to the proportions of the building. The mythologic narration of a world made from the body of an overwhelmed enemy or monster reveals nothing else but deep relation existing between the original body and the house. The tombs and grave monuments as places of a collective memory show how a building was still magically laden by the body.





imaginary complements as if this were something natural. The wall becomes the veritable *locus locorum* of the Baroque period, for the simple reason that it bears the greatest resemblance with the CHARTA, the place of text. The wall, however, also becomes the locus of *inscriptio*, like the paper of the cryptographs, a public place of the "other text" with maximum semantic profundity, as soon as the inscriptions follow the model and the idea of a multi-dimensional text, as for instance the hieroglyphic script which was preferred by the Baroque period over Hebraic script.

The wall of the Baroque period can thus be justly described as **glyphostasis**, a term that implies that the mystery lying behind wall is actually condensed on the wall. The Baroque experiments on the wall, to the extent that it tests the possibilities of *translatio* here, more precisely, the *translatio* of spatial depth to the surface<sup>7</sup>. Almost as a complete reflection of the theme of cryptic writing or cryptography, the surface of the wall becomes transformed into a spatial chiffre. On the wall, the latent spaces begin to manifest themselves as curvatures, as movements, as oblique ornaments. A nice example of this cryptospacial design of walls can be found on the wall of the nave of the collegiate church in Melk, or the wainscot of the so-called million room in Schönbrunn<sup>8</sup>. The pseudo-movement of the glyphostasis dissolves the real space, resulting in allusions to phantasized, illusionary, presumed spaces. In lieu of the elementary coordinates of constructed, corporeal spatiality one began to develop a taste for imaginary vectors of

<sup>7</sup> Cryptographic, i.e. also hieroglyphic and Hebrew texts, are described as "profund". *profunditas* is the main quality of these types of scripture. The play with ciphering and deciphering is nothing else than a shift between the - semantic - dimensions. See Alsted: "Kabbala est ars occupata circa textum Hebraicum S.Scripturae profundiori modo explicandum." *Scientiarum omnium Encyclopaedia Tom.I, Lugduni 1649, Lib.XXXV, Sectio IV, p.304*

<sup>8</sup> The million room constitutes a late example for the revolution of sensual perception I wanted to show. The rococo ornamentation can be seen as a certain culmination of the possibilities for using the wall.





pseudo-depths that were twisted perspectively and distorted in turbulences and torsions. Baroque architecture apparently developed its spatial impression from the way it dealt with the wall, i.e., the “veil”<sup>9</sup>, the last and ultimately also decorative step, that gives the building its inimitable stamp. The effect intended by this specific treatment of the wall results from the building being detached from its site, gravity and the pull of the earth. The Baroque composition of glyphostases lends architecture something reaching up to the sky, an imperative *SURSUM!*<sup>10</sup>

The place (according to the old corporeal understanding of architecture, coordinates of the irrevocable immobile) is made despicable by these constructed ascensions. It might be added that the great Baroque buildings, to the extent that they flaunted more than just their architectural delights with their special location, most often take advantage of the careful plotting which the precedent buildings had been subjected to. Melk, too, is in essence a palimpsest, an older building over which the Baroque period wrote, profiting to a large degree from the magic quality of the site already discovered by earlier times. The spatial divestment staged by Baroque glyphostases on these old sites, has a highly dramatic effect against the backdrop of a “corporeal” building.

<sup>9</sup> The veil was the most important instrument of perspective painting: L.B.Alberti: "Die Sache verhält sich so. Man nimmt einen ganz feinen, dünn gewebten Schleier von beliebiger Farbe, welcher durch stärkere Fäden in eine beliebigen Anzahl von Parallelogrammen getheilt ist; diesen Schleier bringe ich nun zwischen das Auge und die gesehene Sache, so daß die Sehpyramide in Folge der Dünneheit des Gewebes hindurchzudringen vermag. Sicherlich gewährt dir dieser Schleier nicht geringe Vortheile." L.B.Alberti: Drei Bücher über die Malerei, italienisch-deutsch, hg., übers. und erläutert von Hubert Janitschek=Quellenschriften für Kunstgeschichte und Kunsttechnik des Mittelalters und der Renaissance, Wien 1877, p.100. At the same time the veil was used to explain the proportions of dimension in the cryptic text: "Aenigma est oratio verborum involucris tecta", Alsted Encyclopaedia Tom.I, loc.cit., Lib.XXXV, Sectio IX AENIGMATOGRAPHIA, p.327.

<sup>10</sup> The importance of the ceiling paintings and decorations is to be considered a consequence resulting from these upward movements.





## II. On Encyclopedia

The project of orientation in text pursued by the Baroque period falls under the heading of encyclopedia. Encyclopedia stands for the redemption attempt of memory afflicted by the change of media in the Renaissance. Whereas the Renaissance sought a mnemo-therapy based on generative techniques of an efficient mnemonics, the Baroque period, in turn, began to elaborate and “petrify”, to establish immense textual worlds which could still be surveyed<sup>11</sup>. These worlds grinned from the shelves of the libraries whose quintessence they concealed within themselves. From Comenius to Matthioli, Aldrovandi and Kircher, for instance, encyclopedia was seen as setting a textual monument for the knowledge deemed relevant for a certain time. There can also be no doubt that it is the spirit of the monumental *inscriptio* from which Baroque creations - both in architecture and text - stem.

The difficulties involved in creating an encyclopedic oeuvre were not the lacking availability of source material. Rather, order and system, on the basis of which knowledge was to be made accessible, was what kept the mind preoccupied - even in a controversial sense. To the extent that the Baroque encyclopedia project and a universal science are to be understood as a remedy for the crisis of memory and as a realization of the possibilities available under the horizon of text, such projects actually had to present themselves as a new, binding model of orientation<sup>12</sup>. Before the rise of the alphabetical, lexically

<sup>11</sup> See the Praefatio ad lectorem in Alsted's Encyclopaedia Tomus I, loc.cit. "Encyclopaedia est methodica comprehensio in hâc vitâ homini descendarum" and: "Encyclopaedia est systema omnium systematum", Lib.I, Cap.I, p.47. The turn from the ars memoriae to the encyclopedistic project marks the beginning of a new anthropology: man becomes the eternal disciple, from now on being means learning.

<sup>12</sup> I would like to mention the important role of Alsted who was both a initiator of mnemotechnician and of encyclopedic theory and practice, see for example his magnum opus "Systema mnemonicum duplex".







structured monumental texts of the high Baroque period - for instance, the Zedler lexicon or the Morelli - the orientation imago on which current knowledge was based - had to serve as a code for using the encyclopedia. Immediately following the exuberantly pompous titles and the ornamental frontispiece the reader of such an early encyclopedic oeuvre was confronted with the so-called synopsis in which an outline of the material presented had been elaborated on the basis of internal relationships and coherence. Here the encyclopedist - in complete contrast to architecture which at the same time was trying to rid itself of its ubiquitary relatedness to a particular place - hints at a spatial model of orientation structured after geography. The encyclopedist obviously still had faith in a well-established and efficiently functioning corporeal memory. That is to say, the encyclopedist argued and proceeded in a *TOPIC* way. In his topic, Cicero had described topos as the place where a hidden treasure is to be unearthed, and it is precisely in this function that the topos works in the monumental text as a thesaurus. Being grounded in topics, the encyclopedia only proves that even in the world of text it was not possible to stop looking from an up/down/left/right and that one was still willing to jump head over heels in text in the tacit hope that at the bottom of the well one would find the Other World reflecting the structure of This World.

The Baroque wall as glyphostasis and the encyclopedia as glyphostasis operate with "latent space", with a space which only as phantasized, imagined, hallucinated space places the indices or glyphs in meaningful connections. In architecture, the suppression of the old space is celebrated, whereas in the new model medium, text, its potential for creating orientation, is doggedly conjured up and suggested. In both realms, in architecture and in encyclopedia, the spatial structure or order is a "dreamed" one, space is always a secondary space composed only of a logical path and event mark that had once been inserted in a real space. In the *topic* disposition of the monumental text, the Baroque





period reveals that it does not seek to definitively rely on the order imago of text but that one is prompted to appeal to realms of experience transcending the limits of textuality, just to be on the safe side.

Cicero's topic also operates with figures of argumentation which apart from their logical formalization draw most of their persuasive power from all of the author's experience in Roman culture and legal matters. *Topical* argumentation thus seems to employ an older model of order, one that has been lost in it, as a secret processor, which might very well also be the reason why topics is the real, genuine logic of every mnemotechnique. The early Baroque encyclopedias strived to make the order of a given view of the world visible in the structure of the material, which is why making recourse to the old magnetism between topography and topics was inevitable. Even the mother of the encyclopedia, the Baroque Library, is nothing less than a creation drawing on the spirit of this magnetism. Its ornamental completion enabled the visitor to localize the realms of knowledge by his own body, which may have proven to be useful in mnemotechnical terms. The figure of the triumphant synopsis, however, ultimately made it completely impossible for the Baroque collection of books to go beyond its time. Only the absolute victory of the alphabet as the least illustrative<sup>13</sup> of all forms of order finally destroyed the architectonics of the Baroque text, paving the way to not only new forms of lexical techniques of invention. As soon as one had departed from the sphere of the letters of an *ORBIS PICTUS* inscribed in discrete places of the world and the transformation of a

<sup>13</sup> Marafiotus already proposed using the alphabet in mnemotechnic orientation: "Sunt ergo huius artis figurae numero viginti tres, ad numerum alphabeti & tribus atque viginti locantur locis, in unoquoque ambarum manuum facie". What Marafiotus described is a sort of "keyboard feeling" in the hands effected by alphabetic orientation and the conditioning of man as a not only reading but also writing animal. F.Hieronimi MARAFIOTI Polistinensis (...) De ARTE Reminiscentiae per loca, & imagines, ac per notas, & figuras in manibus positas (...), Argentorati excudebat Antonius Bertramus 1603, p.9





paradigmatic medium in text was completed, the enormous tension in letters and lines abated, and the forces that pulled the forms back and forth and pressed against them gradually ebbed. The great era of cryptography and of involutive or spiral-shaped mysteries came to an end with the completion of the reconstruction. With the deep installation of **text** in cultural memory, however, architecture became subject to a permanent crisis<sup>14</sup>, the most striking symptom of which can be seen in the display of antiquicizing and other historizing stylistic exercises carried out since the Baroque and Rococo periods, respectively.

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Sennett referred to this point in his book "Flesh and Stone", but I do not agree with his argumentation in connecting architecture and the body. Sennett leaves out the memory topic which is the reason that his analysis of the downfall of architecture remains somehow superficial. R.Sennett: Fleisch und Stein. dt. Der Untergang der Stadt in der westlichen Zivilisation, aus dem Amerikanischen von Linda Meissner, Berlin 1995

