

The Witch in the Wardrobe.

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The traditional story of architecture rests within the economy of vision. Modernism follows this tradition. It is new and clean.

[It] is not simply the look of cleanliness but a cleaning of the look, a focusing of the eye. Not a machine for looking at but a machine for looking.¹

Smell is expelled (*fig 1*).

The origins, of Modernism's removal of smell, can be found in the nineteenth century aerist theories which influenced architecture.

[Theorists aimed] to use nothing but architectural resources to capture the air, cause it to circulate, and expel it. The aim for designing a building was to separate putrid exhalations from currents of fresh air. The idea was that the shape of the building itself would ensure satisfactory ventilation. Cupola and dome were transformed into machines to draw up miasmas. Abandonment of the ground floor in favor of the first storey began to be advocated so that the living space is separated from earth and exposed to the purifying action of the air.²

This extended to the planning of towns.

Trades that caused unpleasant odors would be moved outside the walls, together with cemeteries, hospitals, and butchers' shops. Factories would be located in the suburbs. Wide streets, vast squares dotted with fountains, would facilitate the circulation of air.³

This is the dispersal of the smell of the crowd which is the smell of confusion and chaos, an explosive, undefined concoction. With the emergence of the nineteenth century concept of the individual, came the desire to control smell. Smell has the invisible ability to transform the individual's experience of space by transgressing the social boundaries that the individual constructs (*fig 2*).

Gottfried Semper subverts the traditional story of architecture. For Semper the house begins with women, the woven fabric, the textile, texture, an appreciation of a sensual and sensory perception. For Semper architecture is artificial, it is combinative, and it creates a disguise. According to Semper, woman is at the origin of architecture, because architecture's woven form places it

within the tradition of the feminine arts. It is a process that has been "borrowed" from "the mother of the human race."⁴ Semper appropriates her art in his theory on the origins of architecture and as he places her at its origins she disappears into the past beneath its history.

But Semper is the sorcerer who inserts smells into his fabric. "To complete the image of an oriental residence one has to imagine the costly furnishings of gold-plated couches and chairs, divans, candelabras, all kinds of vases, carpets, and the fragrance of incense."⁵ However, smell contains a threat that undoes Semper's notion of architecture. "An odour is always, in fact, something only half-formed: no pattern has the proportions demanded for the acquisition of an odour."⁶

Smell transgresses boundaries and certain materials encourage this transgression.

Chevreul condemned the capillarity of mortar. Walls, intended to separate and support, also proved to be conduits, sites of complex upward movements, and, like the soil, repositories for ancient filth. They combined deposits with the wafts of mephitisms and hence concealed a multiplicity of threats. Also fatal were emanations from new walls, the odor of plaster and humidity ... In Paris new buildings were left to prostitutes, a practice known as 'drying out the plaster.'⁷

Before the proper tenants inhabit the building, the prostitutes, who soak up the excess of desire, soak up the waste products that emanate from the new walls and when this is done they are removed. Woman is the surrogate victim, the disposable object that disappears after she inhabits the space, put in her place, before it becomes proper, a proper place as the property of the rightful owners.

The prostitutes are contaminated by desire but they are important to society as their role is to embody its image of sickness. They cure society as its ills are directed away from the populace to this disposable object operating at the margins (*fig 3*).

Prostitutes are working women - women who work in the marketplace. For Emile Zola, in *The Belly of Paris*, the crowd consists of women and their produce. The smell of women in the marketplace is the smell of fish as this is

the produce of their labour. This smell represents the desirable female, therefore the smell of desire in Zola's marketplace is the pungent aroma of fish. Smell and desire combine to produce the image that woman is an offensive threatening stench.

In the marketplace produce that has been removed from life begins to decay. "The impregnation of the stalls by foul smells aroused the desire to destroy that is so frequently manifested in the projects of urban reformers."⁸ The desire to destroy also comes from the desire to control the process of decay - the smell of death. The architectural solution is to wipe out the offending rotten structure so that a clean form can take its place.

According to Yvonne Verdier, order is masculine and it is his knowledge that is put at the origin of creation. Women are associated with incompleteness and it is the masculine order, or odour that is required for completion.

*What gave woman's smell its ideal quality was male sperm, in the same way that the act of coitus filled the flesh of the females of numerous animal species with a specific odor. In every sphere, sexual intercourse was held to complete femininity.*⁹

For Corbin the temporary structures of the stalls are open to impregnation. These temporary female structures are inadequate, and more; they insult. According to Corbin the female form is seen to be lacking and the application of another substance restores order. The "aromatic effluvia provoked or 'destroyed the vapors' of the womb and restore it to its natural condition."¹⁰ This ordering technique is a device to correct and complete the female form. As architecture constructs, it enacts a process of insertion, it fills in the gaps by impregnating the fabric with a redeeming smell. This specific odour is a male smell. All orifices are sealed.

Fabric which exposes a texture that allows gaps, is seen to stand for the passive body of a woman open to impregnation. The insertion of a foreign substance fills in the gaps of the fabric and as these gaps are filled it cannot breathe.

*Walls preserved odors ... prisoners recognised the odors of incarceration that had impregnated the dungeon at Vincennes years after it had ceased to be a state prison. This strange preservative power was deadly: 'A doctor attended a woman afflicted with a gangrenous disease from which she died. Two years later, returning to the same place to visit another patient, he found the same gangrenous odor, the odor sui generis' The walls had transmitted the disorder of the bodily tissues.*¹¹

The walls absorb and transmit a potion of death, this potion is the disorder of the body produced by women. This deadly potion is removed and with its removal woman is erased.

*After an epidemic of puerperal fever ... workers disinfected the murderous room; this task involved removing the layers of old mortar. 'As they detached the rubble from the walls and ceilings, a most fetid odor was given off ... the stench was so great that it even surpassed the odor of a dissection room.'*¹²

The modernist architect removes the past, scrapes the surface until it is clean, purified. The dirt is purged from without and a clean homogenous layer is applied to cover and protect the naked structure.

*Sanitary reformers revived the Old Testament injunctions against the mouldy infections of houses. Taking down old plaster and replacing it, piercing walls, removing bricks in direct contact with the earth because they absorbed the putrid substances mixed in it, were not just sound recommendations for construction. Plastering, coating, painting, and whitewashing walls, vaults, and woodwork provided a positive armour against miasma. Plaster was deemed not only pleasing to the eye but also an effective agent in the struggle against infection. Banau intended his anti mephitic varnish to be used for walls and furniture as well as for clothing.*¹³

The myth of the whitewash operates as a ritual of 'architectural hygiene' and according to Mark Wigley,

*it is not a passive neutrality. The whitewash is not simply what is left behind after the removal of decoration. It is the active mechanism of erasure. More than a clean surface, it is the cleaning agent, cleaning the body in order to liberate the eye. The whitewash makes the objects of everyday life visible, as any impurity, any decorative excess would leave a 'stain' on its surface.*¹⁴

The non-porous varnish masters materiality and,

*Even without texture, the smooth white surface remains a fabric. We are still in the domain of the text.*¹⁵

The body is transformed into form as it is masked by the whitewash. As insertions can be made in the text, "The whitewash is inserted between two threats in order to transform body into form (fig 4)."¹⁶

In a society that supports the illusion that everything is exposed, all secrets are dirty. Women threatens this as her cyclical nature is secret, hidden within her body. As the flow of blood is secreted, it indicates a dirty secret. Woman is associated with disguise, to disguise is to deceive. The deception is seen to be a disease. Blood

indicates violence and it is contagious, as blood flows from a woman's body she represents disease.

*The special condition of women whose smells were in a state of imbalance also derived from these beliefs: redheads were always pungent, both putrid and fascinating, as if their cycle had broken down and put them in a continuous state of menstruation; pregnant women, temporarily deprived of menstrual effluvia, were also examples of imbalance.*¹⁷

Either way, the delicate balance of order is upset, the disease of the feminine is introduced, "By restoring the elasticity of the air Gauger hoped to stem female disease."¹⁸ Rather than the 'female disease' the disease is the feminine. The feminine threatens the masculine order as desire crosses the boundary of appearance. The female body is soft, her desire is hidden in the folds of excess flesh. The economy of vision that organises form can never be satisfied by feminine desire as it is never seen.

Woman becomes the sacrificial victim - she is the witch.

*Witches spread on the surface of the globe 'like caterpillars in our gardens,' says an inquisitor ... contagion spreads through bits of bodily waste and through odors ... Wastes: nail clippings, menstrual blood, excrement, a lock of hair: these scraps of the body are what will act as charm. As partial objects detached from the body, they are especially powerful, in the same way that 'object a,' the part where the object of desire settles is powerful in its very detachment. The pound of flesh: take it and it is death ... Partial objects, bound by bodily geography to orifices: voice, spit, tears, shit, a cry, anything secreted and transmitted ... the precious secretions are partial objects for the others' desire.*¹⁹

The witch roams in the garden. She manipulates desire by collecting waste and recirculating it. Her spells are contagious. These partial objects, objects of desire, contain the threat of death (fig 5).

The architectural space of woman, as object of desire, is put aside, outside, in the garden. It is separated from the place of work, the house. The garden is where the woman plays, it presents an atmosphere for adventure and escape from the confines of the house. Its woven fabric creates the opportunity for seduction in its hidden recesses. This ritual is expressed by Bataille as that between the man and the animal, the woman is the prey. In this dance of seduction, the woman who enters the game is the animal in disguise, her role is to choose the moment to sacrifice herself and thus divert violence into the realm of play. Woman is the animal as she exists close to nature and its cyclical processes, in the garden. Perfume is the aroma of the garden which impregnates her clothing and skin and attracts the hunter to her.

The garden, the domestic hunting ground, is an environment designed to contain female desire. It structures isolation and traps women, dissipating the threat of desire with perfume. Its boundaries are not separate from the repressive structure of the house.

Architecture is always rebuilt upon the shattered fragments of the past. It mirrors these fragments. Architecture reflects itself, and its past for the future. It is an instrument to behold the selfsame image, a narcissistic device. Architecture also uses the mirror to reflect itself. The mirror reflects the fabric, the architectural mask, and it multiplies this image. For Trinh Minh-ha,

*A shattered mirror still functions as mirror; it may destroy the dual relation of I to I but leaves the infiniteness of life's reflections intact. Here reality is not reconstituted, it is put into pieces so as to allow another world to rebuild (keep on unbuilding and rebuilding) itself with its debris ... writing is meshing one's writing with the machinery of endless reflexivity. Footprints of emptiness multiplied to infinity in an attempt at disarming death.*²⁰

Reality is reduced "to a chain of causes and effects."²¹ Architecture is the ritual, the performance of the operation that controls the elemental mixture to ensure the continuation of the same.

Smell stimulates memory and instigates a reflection for a particular place. Smell is an intimate sensation and is by definition non-visual:

*... odor gives us the most intimate sensations, a more immediate pleasure, more independent of the mind, than the sense of sight; we get profound enjoyment from an agreeable odor at the first moment of its impression; the pleasure of sight belongs more to reflections, to the desires aroused by the objects perceived, to the hopes they give birth to.*²²

Yet even in spaces, such as the garden, where smell is experienced, it is sight, rather than smell, which governs the design.

A garden was of course, primarily, a picture. Its composition was based on the mechanism of sight. Architects were clearly guided by the desire to indulge sight and hearing above the other senses. The English garden provided the opportunity to consecrate and enact a hierarchy of the senses in a manner that resembled a religious litany. Hirschfield summarised the position decisively in 1779: Of the senses the sense of smell, which receives the sweet exhalations of plants and vegetables, seems to be the last, unless it is joined with the coarser sense of touch, to experience the refreshing action of the air; consequently the artist, though without neglecting the sense of smell entirely, had to work for

*the eye and the ear, particularly for the eye. Therefore the gardener will mainly endeavor to expose the visible beauties of rural nature (fig 6).*²³

Form persists, while smell is diffused with the movement of time. Smell marks time in the garden, it is part of the natural cyclical process and as such it is associated with woman. Woman, associated with smell, becomes, in the garden, like the flowers - insubstantial, a momentary substance.

The design of the house in the nineteenth century is motivated by the separation of form and smell. Public and private, male and female space are demarcated as

*... the only way to get rid of troublesome smells and to reserve private space for the delicate effluvia of intimacy was to sort them out and contain the strongest smells in the appropriate places. This demarcation of the intimate spaces of interior monologue liberated the olfactory possibilities of both bedchamber and salon; they sanctioned the emergence of an aesthetic of olfaction within private space. The skilful arrangement of the background smells in the boudoir came to be aesthetically inseparable from the odor of the woman to whom one came for inspiration.*²⁴

In this way woman, smell and the boudoir combine to create a world for male appreciation and consumption (fig 7).

In the twentieth century the design of the bathroom changes. It is no longer the space of sensual practice, where dirt and the naked body are exposed. The voluptuous space is reduced, sanitised and given mechanical functions and proportions. The hygienic space removes dirt, it does not display it.

*For a long time the nudity of moving bodies, the total freedom of the gestures of the toilette, and the cosy intimacy sheltered from all intrusion, conferred on the place a perfume of licentiousness ... The rare nineteenth century bathrooms, equipped with heavy furniture and protected by wall hangings, tended to be spacious ... They advised paneling the partitions to protect against the mephitism of the walls, and above all using solid partitions to shelter the bedroom from condensation and moist odors ... Later the use of clean and decent geometric space came to underwrite the idea of the bathroom area as a sensually neutral and innocent space (fig 8).*²⁵

To examine how the nineteenth century concept of the individual affected architecture we can begin with waste.

*The place for defecation became specific and individualised. The privatization of waste tended to make it the place for an inner monologue. Water closets were introduced and tombs became individual and lost their stench.*²⁶

Waste and death are the areas which demand attention because of smell. With the dead resting in the tomb, the living resting in bed and women resting in the garden, the space of the individual is articulated. Rest, in any form now requires separation. The individual is isolated in the bed and in death. As the bedchamber is connected with the casket, the smell of seduction becomes the smell of death. Desire becomes connected with the corpse, and the waste of the dead (fig 9).

*The end of the eighteenth century also brought the first symptoms of a reduced threshold of the tolerance among the masses, who made a direct connection between odors and death ... The stench of corpses seems to have been the first to arouse nearly universal intolerance ... The perceived correlation between the odor of corpses and the corruption of meat and metals accentuated feelings of anxiety.*²⁷

The odour of seduction, the odour given off by women is the odour of the corpse that corrupts meat and metals, "the sorceress whose menstrual effluvia tarnished metal and turned the meat in the saltingtub."²⁸

Woman is the corpse and the corpse according to Kristeva is the fallen, a symbol for the waste that falls beyond life. The corpse lies at the border crossing the bridge or boundary between life and death as,

*A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death ... as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit - cadere, cadaver.*²⁹

Culture, according to Bataille, is built on the taboo of the transgression of life. This taboo results from the fear of death. Death is sacred, care is to be taken with the human corpse. It is different from the corpse of the animal, it requires burial. The separation of the human corpse from that of the animal is identified by Bataille as the origin of the differentiation of the individual. The architecture of death, the tomb, begins with the transgression of the boundary of life and it separates the individual from the crowd. The individual tomb removes the stench of the crowd, the stench of a mass of rotting corpses (fig 10).

Architecture is the rite of death. It is the bridge that is required by transgression to ensure the continuance of culture. Architecture exists on the border to carry the

body beyond death. It creates a container that has the magical rite of transference, of resurrection, of life after death. The burial of the body hides the ugly process of decay.

The smell of death, the smell of the corpse, is not death itself. Smell is alive and it is through smell that death lives. It challenges the structure of architecture, as it fills the spaces of architecture and transforms them. The processes of burial and fumigation follow the architectural rite of forgetting as architecture acts to deceive memory.

NOTES

- 1 Mark Wigley, "Architecture After Philosophy: Le Corbusier and the Emperor's New Paint," *Philosophy and Architecture* ed. A. Benjamin, (London: Academy Editions/New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), p. 85.
- 2 Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French social imagination* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 99.
- 3 Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant* p. 100.
- 4 Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant* p. 220.
- 5 Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant* p. 216.
- 6 Plato, *Timaeus and Critias* trans. A. E. Taylor, (London: Methuen, 1929), p. 69.
- 7 Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant* p. 25.
- 8 Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant* p. 55.
- 9 Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant* p. 46.
- 10 Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant* p. 62.
- 11 Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant* p. 26.
- 12 Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant* p. 26.
- 13 Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant* p. 91.
- 14 Wigley, "Architecture After Philosophy," p. 85.
- 15 Wigley, "Architecture After Philosophy," p. 88.
- 16 Wigley, "Architecture After Philosophy," p. 87.
- 17 Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant* p. 45.
- 18 Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant* p. 95.
- 19 Catherine Clement, "Sorceress and Hysteric," Helene Cixous and Catherine Clement *The Newly Born Woman* trans. Betsy Wing (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), p. 34-35.
- 20 Trinh Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: writing postcoloniality and feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 23.
- 21 Trinh, *Woman, Native, Other* p. 23.
- 22 Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant* p. 82-83.
- 23 Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant* p. 79.
- 24 Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant* p. 169.
- 25 Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant* p. 175.
- 26 Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant* p. 83-84.
- 27 Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant* p. 58.
- 28 Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant* p. 45.
- 29 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of horror: an essay on abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 3.