

## *Facing Cinecitta*

Gregory Crewdson's black and white photograph *Untitled 8*, 2009 presents a scene of what might be an ancient or Renaissance Roman street. It is dilapidated and overgrown with weeds. Setting aside the impossible coincidence of photographic technology with ancient or Renaissance Rome, two details disturb the coherence of the scene: in the hazy distance we see what seem to be modernist flats; and in the foreground of the image, the arch spanning the road is supported by a wooden scaffolding that belies its status as a stone structure. The photograph is part of Crewdson's series of images of Cinecitta in Rome. Cinecitta is populated by film sets, some still in use, some in a state of ruin. Crewdson's images span a range of historical periods from the Roman Empire to the fictional setting of the spaghetti western. They also span relatively convincing images like *Untitled 8* to images where the forces of nature have had the upper hand and the *mise-en-scène* has been reduced to a procession of holey walls.

The photographs present views that the cinematic camera necessarily eludes. Both the surface of the sets and their 'underside', the infrastructure of their construction, are exposed to the Crewdson's camera, in other words, both the illusion and its construction. The impact of this doubled view is, in fact, to make emphatic the outward facing nature, the public character of Cinecitta's simulated architectural surfaces.

In Cinecitta all walls face us. This is what Crewdson's images tell us, simply.

In *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* Robert Venturi describes architecture thus: 'since the inside is different from the outside, the wall – the point of change – becomes an architectural event. Architecture occurs at the meeting between interior and exterior...'<sup>1</sup> Complexity and contradiction emerge because the wall on one side is adapted toward the interior and its demands of privacy and protection; potentially the same wall, but facing outward is environmentally oriented toward a collective world outside. To say that architecture is located at the tension point between two discontinuously oriented surfaces – one directed inwards and one outwards – is to argue for the mutual, contradictory coexistence of those two orientations. The array of examples that Venturi refers to are analyzed in terms of how these distinctions and contradictions are worked through in architectural form.

The 1977 edition of *Complexity and Contradiction* contains a revised preface in which Venturi expresses his regret that the text had not been titled *Complexity and Contradiction in Architectural Form*. The 1966 edition predates *Learning from Las Vegas* with its focus on symbolism in architecture. For Venturi, a reference to 'form' in the title of *Complexity and Contradiction* would suggest the one book as a 'complement' to the later book more clearly.<sup>2</sup> The intervention is noteworthy because it indicates after the fact that Venturi did not want the two books to be read as a progression from one to the other: in other words, as a linear progression from the focus on form to that of symbolism where form is superseded by symbolism. The second book, in actuality, does repeatedly call for a prioritization of sign over form. In the model of the 'decorated shed' the Las Vegas' building façade cum symbol stands in front of and takes priority

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (London: The Architectural Press, Ltd, 1977), 86

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, 14

over the simple, 'styleless' and less attentively formed shed behind. The linguistic takes precedent over the phenomenological.

The argument of *Complexity and Contradiction*, in contrast, does not devalorize the importance of form and the structuring of space per se. It takes issue, rather, with a misdirected 'organic' metaphor that insists on reading architectural form as generated from the inside out – and which ignores a more comprehensive organic model that takes into account how organic growth is also inflected by environment. If within the ideology of modernism in architecture, 'outward appearances resemble inner purposes'<sup>3</sup>, then the exterior wall is genuinely mere 'appearance'. As an expression of internal function, the exterior wall is continuous with the building's interior, still part of it. In other words, its external form is not determined externally but internally.

Michael Fried's analysis in *Manet's Modernism* of the problematic of absorption and theatricality in 19<sup>th</sup> century French painting touches on related questions in respect of the generation of the image. It is the address that pictorial representation makes or denies the beholder that is the specific object of enquiry here. In what Fried describes as 'theatrical painting' the fictive, represented scene is one that is self aware – aware of its being an object of vision. It 'plays to the audience'. Importantly, the status of the represented scene – as theatrical – extends to the painting as a whole as an aesthetic object: the painting – as theatrical – is shaped by 'external constraint' rather than a sense of *inner necessity*.<sup>4</sup> The value judgement in operation here is clearly in sympathy with the 'organic' metaphor of orthodox architectural modernism.

The idea of the 'absorptive *tableau*' in painting is one that emerged in response to what was seen as the rhetorical and 'excessive' nature of theatricality in painting. Absorptive painting, at its height, typically depicted personages fully absorbed in activity, with the sleeping figure standing as the exemplar of absorption. The idea of *tableau* as it developed into the 19<sup>th</sup> century was intimately tied to the idea of 'absorptive closure'; namely, the scene depicted was one that asserted a sense of an existence independent of a viewer. In addition to guaranteeing the integrity of the painted space itself as a 'particular world', the absorptive *tableau* reinforces the interiority of its depicted figures. Critically, absorption in Fried's account is '...an *antitheatrical* device... instrumental to attempts by successive generations of French painters to make pictures that would somehow negate or neutralize the primordial convention that paintings are made to be beheld....'<sup>5</sup> A form of denial is clearly indicated here. It is inherent to the nature of painting that it is intended to be seen. However, in Fried's account of this particular trajectory of French painting, that 'beheld-ness' crucially could not be experienced as determining the individual painting's nature as an aesthetic object. This is what is neutralized within absorptive painting. The success of the absorptive work of art depends on its '...blindness to being beheld'.<sup>6</sup> This is the condition of both the painting's realism and its 'conviction' as an artwork. Paradoxically, the beholder is simultaneously negated by the painting and 'convinced' by it for the very same reason – because s/he is denied by it. A fiction surrounding the nature of the work's production is, thus, projected onto its reception as a work.

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<sup>3</sup> Sullivan, quoted in Venturi, *Complexity*, 82

<sup>4</sup> Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism or, The Face of Painting in the 1860's* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 194

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, 189-190

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, 196

It might be said that a similar movement – a similar denial – marks the dialectic of interior and exterior in the aesthetic reception of Modernist architecture. If we follow Venturi's analysis, modernist architecture, is not indifferent to an external viewer as such. Rather, its exterior is 'expressive' – expressive of its internal function and structure and, hence, continuous with it. Like Fried's antitheatrical painting, then, its exterior visibility is determined by its internal integrity. That fiction surrounding its production is, likewise, projected onto its reception. As a result, the *civic function* of its exterior wall and the vitality and specificity with which it addresses exterior, public space come to be elided as an issue. This, ultimately, is the critique of *Complexity and Contradiction*.

By the time of *Learning from Las Vegas* Venturi, now writing together with Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, shifts emphasis toward the place of symbolism in architecture. The dialectic of interior and exterior so pivotal to *Complexity and Contradiction* becomes reoriented toward the differing concerns of function and symbolism, often aligned along the axis of 'front' and 'back' rather than inside and outside. With this reorientation, the dialectic itself is substantially transformed. Architecture is now defined as 'shelter with decoration on it':

... We like emphasizing shelter in architecture, thereby including function in our definition; and we like admitting to symbolic rhetoric in our definition which is not integral with shelter, thereby expanding the content of architecture beyond itself and freeing function to take care of itself.... The definition of architecture as shelter with symbols on it presupposes an acceptance of the functional doctrine, not a rejection of it – an augmentation of it for the sake of maintaining it.<sup>7</sup>

Here the initial opposition between interior and exterior comes to be replaced by the tension between function and aesthetic requirements more generally. Functionality and aesthetics are per se taken as mutually exclusive and best left that way. There is, in addition, however, also the tendency within the rhetoric of *Learning from Las Vegas* to treat the question of functionality as applying to a building's internal role as 'shelter' – the back of the building – with aesthetic requirements pertaining to its external surface, its façade. This shift is notable for the way that, firstly, the function of architecture in terms of its externally directed face is not taken into account (or, at least, this is not termed 'function' as such) and, secondly, the function of architecture proper seems to be delimited to being a 'building', a shelter of some sort. This is most explicit in the catchphrase 'the decorated shed'. The initial wholeheartedly – and contentiously – embraced disjunction between interior and exterior and the later but equally wholeheartedly embraced discontinuity between function and aesthetics tend to be collapsed into one another in *Learning from Las Vegas*.

In *Complexity and Contradiction* the opposition between interior and exterior is set out as a conflict and contradiction that requires the *work* of architecture to resolve (without making continuous that which is by nature discontinuous): 'Architecture, as the wall between the inside and the outside becomes the spatial record of their resolution and its

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Venturi, "A Definition of Architecture as Shelter with Decoration on it, and Another Plea for Symbolism of the Ordinary in Architecture" (first published 1978) in Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, *A View from the Campidoglio: selected essays 1953-1984*, ed. P. Arnell, T. Bickford, C. Bergart (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 65

drama.<sup>8</sup> By the time of *Learning from Las Vegas*, the problem seems to be resolved by the function-symbolism opposition itself: structure deals with function and symbolism with meaning. Therefore, the 'solution' is to adorn the exterior wall. Architecture defined as '...shelter with symbols on it'<sup>9</sup> would seem, thus, to signal a shift from the specific to the generic. Whereas in *Complexity and Contradiction*, the practice of architecture is itself the working through of a solution to the specific opposition between interior and exterior presented by each singular instance, in *Learning from Las Vegas* a generic solution is provided via the example of Las Vegas. This is not a problem when the specific conditions of the Las Vegas Strip are the instance under discussion. But when this is, in turn, proposed as a definition for architecture in general, the dialectic central to *Complexity and Contradiction* is glossed over and one of the more important possible points of continuity between the two texts lost.<sup>10</sup>

The polemical thrust of *Learning in Las Vegas* is clear in its intent to redeem for architecture the lost terrain of symbolism and meaning so neglected in architectural modernism's regaling of form. For Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour the lesson of Las Vegas is that of conceiving of architecture as sign first and foremost and only secondly, as spatial form. *Learning from Las Vegas*' polemical drive can also be read through the optic of Fried. His analysis of the shift in the tensions at play between the absorptive and theatrical that culminates in Manet's work is of particular interest here. For Fried Manet's painting of the 1860's is original in its achievement of what he calls an '*anti-absorptive tableau*'. Of Manet's *The Old Musician* of 1862 Fried writes: '...[it] compels the viewer to take [the painting] in as a whole, a single intense facing object of vision – a single *striking* object of vision.... It is as if *The Old Musician* itself – the painting, not just the figure – gazes at the beholder through a single pair of eyes...' <sup>11</sup> In other words, against absorptive tendencies, Manet's painting is wholly orchestrated as a single *facing* surface, which in its 'facingness' directly addresses the viewer, as if, as Fried says, the painting as a whole gazes out at the beholder. It is exactly this sense of an outward gaze that is palpable in *Learning from Las Vegas*' characterization of the symbolic address of the buildings of Las Vegas. As signs the decorated sheds of Las Vegas are oriented outwardly to their readers/consumers. The buildings of Las Vegas blatantly *face* rather than rebuff the external viewer. Architecture coincides with the linguistic and iconic sign and the address of the decorated shed is fast and direct. It intercepts the gaze before spatial understanding can or even needs to begin its work.

Fried's analysis of Manet teaches us that the workings of 'facingness' operates at multiple levels, however. These are both formal and representational. What is at issue is the orchestration of an image to produce a facing orientation of a surface. To return to Venturi's assertion of a complementary relation between *Complexity and Contradiction* and *Learning from Las Vegas*, if symbolism is understood as one mode of address – or 'facingness' – amongst others within architecture, the continuity between the two texts becomes clearer again. The crux of the earlier text lies in its celebration of double and

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<sup>8</sup> Venturi, *Complexity*, 86

<sup>9</sup> Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: the Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977), 90

<sup>10</sup> In Venturi's later writings he returns to this position, for instance, in his assessment of the Martorana Chapel as a historical exemplar: 'It provides pragmatic solutions to real problems rather than easy obedience to ideal forms – as Stanislas von Moos has put it, it solves problems but expresses them too.'" ('Diversity, Relevance and Representation in Historicism, or *Plus ca Change...*' in Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, *Campidoglio*, 108

<sup>11</sup> Fried, *Manet's Modernism*, 289

heterogeneous address of the architectural wall. Symbolism exists as a form of address. A symbol, by its very nature, orientates itself to – faces – a reader/viewer. It exists to be read. Both the symbolism of the Baroque façade and the signs of the Las Vegas Strip are patent in their address *to someone*. But symbolism is not unique in its capacity to do this. Even function can be considered in these terms: shelter *shelters*.

At issue is the orientation produced by the orchestration of architecture's surfaces. Does an exterior wall *face* public space and, in doing so, take on a function as such? Or is it introverted in its orientation? A façade itself, when it is intended as such, is always a mode of address. For Fritz Neumeyer, in the 'façade culture' of the late Italian Renaissance and the Baroque the outward-facing architectural wall asserted an essential social quality. This was a social quality, he states, that was eventually 'modernistically neutralized' in modernism's functionalist dogma of building from the inside out.<sup>12</sup> In the agoraphobic spaces of de Chirico paintings from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century can be found an early pictorial expression of the subjective impact of this form of neutralization. This is, interestingly, a neutralization that seems to infect the Renaissance structures de Chirico represents as much as their turn of the century industrial counterparts. Exterior walls turn away from the public space of the street rather than towards it, leaving this world's civic spaces a no man's land or void between the obdurate opacity of its architectural structures.

Crewdson's Cinecitta images make emphatic the way that cinematic *mise-en-scène* can perform a radical severing of inside versus outside: there are sets for interior spaces and there are sets for exterior spaces. There is neither any requirement of continuity between them temporally or spatially nor, even more importantly to this discussion, is there a hierarchical relationship between them. Crewdson's *Untitled 16* shows us a doorway into an exterior in relation to which there is no interior, only scaffolding. This is a genuinely autonomous exterior surface. Its role is to communicate itself alone.

Whether it was by conscious decision or a matter of the contingencies of sanctioned access, the spaces represented in Crewdson's images are all public, civic spaces. That Crewdson has chosen to shoot the entire series in black and white is significant. The anachronistic form of their reference points to another time, both in human history and in the history of film. But there is also an indication that they refer melancholically to an earlier form of public space. Because these are sets and, therefore, are pure surface, all the architecture in the photographs faces outward. But that outward gaze coincides as well with their indubitable and resolute character as public walls, walls for an imaginary public as well as a cinematic one.

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<sup>12</sup> Fritz Neumeyer 'Head First through the Wall: an approach to the non-word 'façade'', *The Journal of Architecture*, 4: 3 (1999): 256