

Notes in the Margins on the Ethics of Writing

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Speaking to an Anglo-Saxon public presents me with an opportunity to refer to the man considered to be the father of pragmatism – Charles Sanders Peirce. As we know, Peirce was responsible for the foundation of sign relations, though in a manner that completely shifts the problem with respect, for example, to the work of Saussure, for whom this relationship was dual, taking place between two absolute terms: the signifier and the signified. For Peirce the relationship is not dual, but rather triadic, with a direct effect on the work of interpretation¹. This is a decisive contribution to the idea of truth, no longer an *a priori* condition, but part of a constitutive relation with the habit of answering. All of this throws open an extraordinary horizon for architects, and leads us to look at the relations between the true event and its meaning in a radically different way.

While working on the concept of habit in reference to the work of Peirce, Carlo Sini developed what can be called his most important contribution – the idea of practices. The meaning of this work translates, in an ultimate analysis, into an invitation to look at what we do, similar to a continuous construction of meaning. It implies that we observe the world using our own instruments and practices that, precisely because they contribute to forming our mental habits, are indifferent to our ethical choices. What structures our method of observing and organising the world is a vast tradition based on an admirable grouping of strategies that includes the use of the phonetic alphabet².

Without the arrival of the alphabetic praxis there would, in fact, be no “philosophy”, “architecture”, “space”, “light”, “matter”, “subject” and “object”, “interior” and “exterior”, “man” and the “world”, and so on. The horizon of meaning of a being who does not make use of alphabetic writing is not the horizon of meaning of an illiterate person, though neither is it that of those who make use of syllabic writing, hieroglyphics or ideograms that, in turn, produce other and different habits of lifestyle and knowledge. It is by beginning with alphabetic practices that we reveal the threshold beyond which lies ancient knowledge, with all of its figures, exposing the humanity of theory, the humanity of the sign, and the constitutive universalistic vision that accompanies them³. In synthesis we could say that the alphabetic practice tends to rewrite all of the world’s texts, exiting from the circle frequented by the subject that the same subject, from this moment onwards can no longer frequent, representing the world it now faces and influencing the organisation of the visual system of any subject, up to and including the representation of the world through perspective. The practice of designing in perspective, as noted by many scholars, from Marshall McLuhan onwards, cannot be understood outside of a world dominated by alphabetic writing. With decisive consequences brought on by the way in which the subject itself appears over time and, thus, the

¹ This work of interpretation is carried out by that which Peirce calls “interpreting”. The term is not intended to represent any one single interpreter: while it embodies the subject in the responses, interpreting is a system of signs – a trend, a suit, behaviour, that belongs to our era, to our culture. Peirce thus tells us that by nature reality is a sign, a provocation to provide an answer. This method of intending reality may open entirely new horizons, even in the field of architecture.

² However, if we now possess the so-called ability to distance ourselves from alphabetic writing, making it the object of our reflections and investigations, this is possible due to the imposition of other forms of communication and expression, of other technologies.

³ The studies that highlighted the importance of alphabetic writing as a powerful instrument of technology, capable of becoming the driving force behind all Western knowledge, now widespread across the planet, are from the more recent decades, in particular the mid 20th century. Since the 1960s there has been an overlap in the research of Goody, Havelock, McLuhan and Ong, preceded by that of Parry. However, it was the critical work in the field of philosophical investigation – initially Derrida with his acute re-reading of the well-known *Appendix III of The Crisis of European Sciences* by Husserl and, in a more specific manner, from the 1980s onwards, in particular through the fundamental work of Carlo Sini – that has allowed for a genealogical excavation focused on revealing the profound nature of alphabetic writing. This research was of fundamental importance to the beginnings of a new series of studies that, while not yet entirely recognized, are destined to lay the foundations of investigations in the field of mathematical writing that appear to be even more urgent and necessary, even if they are already partially underway.

past, the present and the future, as part of a linear rhythm that, literally, makes history. Thus the fact that, as has been demonstrated for some time, we are universalising a practice and an instrument that is, in reality, a simple one (as McLuhan partially observed, and as his disciples repeat with a diminishing understanding), because it becomes the driving force of other, deeper transformations, resulting in the growth of new “objects”, “senses of reality” and, more properly, the “political” form of co-existence. While we are imposing universality, in reality we are dealing with a particularity that is exchanged with the principle of the “spirit of all mankind”. All of this, other than being a solemn lie, also represents a serious danger because this universalising attitude, that only the Western World could produce, beginning with the logical-conceptual revolution inaugurated by alphabetic practices, risks leading to the cancellation of other cultures, after having, for some time now, negated them. The physical violence of the past is substituted, or accompanied, by an intellectual version, or that of the “right”, from which not even the compassionate humanity of laymen and men of the cloth is immune. Even here we reach the “final solution” to a problem that, however, with time returns like a *boomerang*: it is “Western Civilisation” that other cultures “desire”, we are told, to imitate, in one way or another. However, it is the interesting intervention of the Western World that, in the long term, has rendered this adhesion unavoidable, obligatory and without alternatives: it is the Western World that has imposed the “universal” and the fact that “others” are finding themselves involved in our universalising project annoys us. It is thus possible that human differences will run aground, literally, against the rocky shores of our seas, against which all life comes crashing.

The problem, in all of its meanings and from all points of view, has to do with our relationship with the Other, which must not be assumed as a mere contingency. All of this has a great deal to do with architecture (what we observe, for example, when investigating the Hestia-Hermes relationship that characterises the spatiality of Ancient Greece⁴), and the node of an “ecological” architecture is to be resolved by passing in this direction. We must understand that any object is present as a reference to something else, precisely because we are dealing with a complexity of elements in synergic and interwoven relationships. The Other is that which we carry inside ourselves. If we are unable to comprehend this, we fall into “infinite materialistic superstitions”, to quote Spinoza and, if we look closely, into the pride and delirium of omnipotence. An “ecological” approach, before being a technical fact, is thus an ethical disposition of dwelling that corresponds with practices that we implement each day, without being capable of defining the limit, which is, to all effects, a “political” limit. The most urgent responsibility is thus that of finding the courage to revisit our origins, re-confronting the first terms of philosophy that represent, it must be said, the roots of Western civilization. By beginning with the constant understanding that even the simple transfer of an object into a new context of practices of life and knowledge, to a greater or lesser degree, mutates the object itself and exposes it to further mutations. However, if this is the true state of things, how will space, light and matter change for the human race and architects in the 21st century? What is the meaning of these metaphors, destined to undergo an inevitable metamorphosis? In fact, there is no “space”, “light” or “matter” as autonomous and

⁴ This analysis would require an investigation similar to that proposed by D. Caramma in *Tracce d'architettura*, Seneca Edizioni, Turin, 2008 (cf. in particular pp. 80-85). The Hestia-Hermes relation can be summarised as follows: the figure of the host (which belongs to the realm of Hestia), by introducing a change in state, transition and contact between extraneous elements requires mediation. This can also be read as a metaphor of the mobile and transient nature of Hermes (the guardian of movement). The latter, in turn, is closely tied to the domestic hearth, as if a part of Hestia (the principle of permanence) belonged to Hermes. As mentioned by J.P. Vernant, it is possible to recognise here the terms of a relationship that opposes and simultaneously unites the female god that immobilises space around a fixed centre, and the male god that renders it infinitely mobile in all of its parts.

absolute entities, in the way in which words define and express them. There are opportunities in the world to encounter the overlapping of practices in synergy and perennial transformation. If mankind is his own project, what are our future possibilities? What possibilities and occasions of meaning await us?

We have been taught that we are literally transformed, and we must not forget this. This happens because we are designing our own physiognomy of “subjects”, *subject to* and played with by the practices that we implement, rewriting our own dependency on the practices that they produce. As such, we are not free from any form of conditioning. The most important point is that the subject can use his condition as an opportunity for implementation, an opportunity for an “ethical” operation, as Sini loves to say. This means fulfilling this genealogical operation as the space in which the subject asks himself questions about his own practices, which are always and in any case interwoven with other practices. This is the result of the fact that any practice, while frequented, is also replicated and, as a result, modified and inhabited in its finite and defined margins. This means that we may be closer to understanding architecture as a field of relations, *the threshold of relation* between the body and the world. This effective transformation of architecture represents the enormous and grandiose obligation that awaits us, and which requires a revolution in critical thinking: the revolution of an entire institutionalised vision of knowledge, focused on the opening of new and never before seen horizons.

This is the problem of the sign, something we now understand with greater ease, the problem of the Western World in its relationship with the Other. Any presence, in reality, is constitutively characterised by its being a trace. It never exists as a mere presence (in the same way that an idolatrous Architecture does not exist), but as a sign in a context of signs, in a field of experiences, in a node of relations, of traces, of references that know no interruption, in a *continuum* that admits no pure presences⁵. It is precisely in the impossibility of a pure act that we find the condition of any possibility of experience. Architecture, like the world, is a space of infinite traces, a written text, and a microcosm to be interpreted. More than *ergòn*, more than the crystallisation of form, it is *energeia*, highly active; a genesis rather than a product; process, movement. In any case we are dealing with guaranteeing the postponement of the Other, a vital condition for the reproduction and regeneration of the real in the correlation with all of its possible realities, escaping any presumed condition of fixity⁶. All of this has to do with a break with the system of functional differences, even more so if they are preordained. Not even language, as Merleau-Ponty was already well aware, can be reduced to the mere function of communication.

We can thus ask a number of questions: what price has been paid for our vision? What has been ignored, precisely at the moment when it was said without being intended? Perhaps the question is structured by our non-dogmatic understanding the truth, as something that is not monolithic and defined. Even when faced with the truth, it is important to make a distinction between its two faces: the moment of truth at its foundation, and the moment of its verification. These two moments overlap out of necessity,

⁵ This was all perfectly clear to some of the exponents of Expressionism (for example, Erich Mendelsohn) and Organicism (whose major representative can be found in Frank Lloyd Wright). For this reason an attentive critical reading of the history of 20th century architecture should observe (in contrast to a unitary and monolithic vision) that an organic approach lies at the roots of modern and contemporary architecture and its development through Expressionism. This was demonstrated, for example, by Bruno Zevi, Peter Blundell Jones, Giovanni Klaus Koenig and, through a critical approach more closely related to recent developments in the field of information technologies, Luigi Prestinenza Puglisi.

⁶ One of the more decisive points of criticism has to do with the parallelism between a conception of architecture as an isolated volume or finished “piece” that refutes its context (a conception present in the late 15th and early 16th centuries: for example Palazzo Strozzi in Florence, a building that Giovanni Michelucci called a “monster”) and the advent of new instruments that allow man to place himself in a precise and calculable position in space, modifying his perception of the world and himself, and laying the groundwork for the birth of modern sciences. The latter was made concrete, during the 17th century by the achievements of Bacon and Descartes and the decisive work of Galileo who theorised a mechanism focused on the reduction of bodies to primary qualities that could be isolated, measured, calculated and verified.

thanks to the constitutive oscillation that characterises them. Yet the founding of the truth and speaking the truth are two different events. Even now we are demonstrating the event of an encounter (of truth), living a moment of foundation of the truth. Can we simultaneously express their meaning? Can we say what it means, what this truth will mean? We cannot, because the truth is not true on its own. Not even for buildings, because their truth is a process of meanings in continuous movement (which has nothing to do with a presumed cultural relativism, but draws on the relativity of our practices). The verification of the truth, we understand, is that which its foundation does not possess. Power, and dogma, however, require exactly this, they want to maintain the truth in order to guarantee its meaning (the absolute and everlasting meaning of being born dead).

Let us then say: foundation and verification cannot be separated; yet they are different. This difference is precisely the condition of any evolution, of any interpretation⁷. This difference marks the gap between the man of power and the man of culture, aware that the truth is not to be found in this text that, as an effect of the truth, exists in transit: the only condition and possibility for opening this approach to a horizon of research and a creative processes capable of experiencing the meaning of any event, of any practice, of any text. This should lead us to the consideration that an intense knowledge, a strong increase in self-referential understanding, cannot help us to found an ethic or a moral capable of opening itself towards the human event, acting as a deterrent to corruption or the perpetuation of more monstrous crimes. Reducing everything to a generic superficiality of knowledge does not even minimally touch on the problem, because understanding cannot be translated into a research capable of involving every fibre of existence. This is even truer if we consider that it cannot be ignored: universal knowledge translates, in reality, into the construction of universality as the essence of the scientific and technological application of conceptual rationality that, let it be understood, on its own does not represent a crime, but results unable to act as a barrier from the moment that it excludes any living relation and conceives of universality as an immortal measure focused on eliminating the constitutive differences of the human race, reducing any relation and any manifestation of truth to the form of a cadaver. We cannot pretend not to see all of this. This is exactly what was made manifest, as never before, during the 20th century. From this point of view it represents the condition of human existence in the wake of the Shoah. Whether we like it or not, “we come after”. This condition should lead us to definitively cut our ties with a conception of the use of knowledge and professional skills (progressively more focused on an obtusely specialised knowledge and a progressive and dangerous shirking of responsibilities) as disconnected poles devoid of any reciprocal relationships. This necessarily leads us to understand, as a result, the urgency of a profound revolution of our existence and practice of culture, something that (only a handful of) philosophers⁸ have been urging for some time.

⁷ In particular see the work of Carlo Sini. To the best of my knowledge the only English text currently available is *Images of Truth: from Sign to Symbol*, Brill Academic Pub, February 1993 (Massimo Verdicchio translator), ISBN-10: 0391037633, ISBN-13: 9780391037632.

⁸ Since the end of 1990s Italy is leading the drive for a radical reconsideration of the foundations of knowledge with a strength that has not been seen for some time. In addition to Carlo Sini, other important young scholars include: Florinda Cambria, Valentina Cappelletti, Massimiliano Cappuccio, Carmine Di Martino, Rossella Fabbrichesi Leo, Federico Leoni, Stefano Malpangotti, Rocco Ronchi and Andrea Zhok.