# The Nature and/or Culture of Architecture

## Bill Taylor

In the Classical era, according to Delaporte[1] and Canguilhem,[2] a knowledge of living beings was prescribed by the practices that sought to care for them. Science, in terms of generally limited speculation, attempted to account for the observations which the garden or plantation, hospital or asylum made obvious through the practice of agricultural or medical arts, while *philosophically*, nature possessed a fundamental unity which could nonetheless be divided into separate kingdoms, a view that hints of the hierarchic world of the Renaissance. One sees, subsequently, a presupposition regarding the distinctive nature of humans informing subsequent theoretical elaboration. Linnaeus, for instance, was furthering theological debate with the aphorism "minerals grow, plants grow and live, animals grow, live and feel."[3] Humans, as was commonly held, were distinguished from these objects and beings by the faculty of reason. Humans were superior to animals, or so Condillac believed, for they possessed a unique mental capacity that arises solely from an ability to receive, store and utilise sensations. Following Locke, Condillac held that a knowledge of nature, all of the complex ideas of it, consists in generalisation of simple ideas which form the mental images of sense impressions. The arts, a general and somewhat vague category encompassing a range of practices, both manual and aesthetic, were also unique to humans, though were themselves distinct from Reason. Classical thought effectively established a boundary between nature and one's knowledge of it, between the theoretical certainties of logic and mathematics on the one hand, and the artful on the other, between philosophical reflection and technical concerns defined by skill and practice.

In the 18th century these inherited values and distinctions were subject to the demand for rigorous scientific description, leading to the policing of boundaries between nature and culture.[4] This policing made use of the phenomena of the feral child, abandoned in the wilderness and deprived of human culture. Similarly, authors wrote of civilised man or woman shipwrecked in the wilderness, forced to apply superior skills to the challenge of nature; Defoe's Robinson Crusoe is one case in point. These figures served as material for establishing the biological determination of the human as one living being among many or the human's uniquely cultural existence. In 1726 Jonathan Swift, who introduced the wild, uncultured Yahoo and archetypically-civilised Houyhnhnm to the shipwrecked Gulliver, took keen interest in the arrival of Peter from the forests of Germany to the court of King James. Defoe later wrote of the wild boy:

*He is now … in a State of Meer Nature, and that, indeed, in the literal Sense of it. Let us delineate his condition, if we can: He seems to be the very Creature which the learned World have, for many Years past, pretended to wish for, viz. one that being kept entirely from human Society, so as never to have heard any one speak, must therefore either not speak at all, or, if he did form any Speech to himself, then they should know what Language Nature would first form for Mankind.*[5]

The study of language, subsequently, becomes a measure of the human being's privileged status, one reinforced by contemporary anthropology and psychology, most notably in the attention paid by psychologists to the acquisition of language skills by children raised in isolated and abusive conditions. Hirst & Woolley acknowledge that Rousseau, has indeed been labelled the father of the 'noble savage,' but argue that:

*postulating the 'state of nature' is a kind of exercise in abstraction, a stripping away of all that man owes to social relations. Natural man is a creature of instinct and appetite, without language or self-consciousness. He is solitary and wild, living in an eternal present, without ideas and subject to his immediate needs.*[6]

Other writers[7] have described the nature portrayed by Rousseau as an idealisation, the "portrayal of spontaneous equilibrium between the world and the values of desire, a state of prehistoric haphazardness" through which the specific inculturated being of man is speculated and not an actual state of existence. From such theoretical speculation to more common-place assumptions, thought is reduced to a combinatorial essence, a simple propositional character encapsulated by language which allows us to say that we (humans) can be said *not* to be them

(the beasts). Seen in this light, perhaps Walt Disney is a modern-day, mass-marketed Rousseau, as he has Kipling's king of the apes crooning to Mowgli, the anglo-indian wild boy:

*I'm the king of the swingers, yeah, the jungle VIP. I've reached the top and had to stop and that's what's a bothering me. I want to be a man, man-cub and stroll right into town and be like all the other man-cubs cause I'm tired of monkeying around.*

*Oh, oopy do. I want to be like you ooh, ooh. I want to walk like you,* talk *like you ooh, ooh, oopy do* [emphasis added].

I would argue that theoretical models of language, particularly those which emphasise meaning, have assumed a prominent place in architectural theory for the same reason. By taking the thoughtful disposition of building physiognomy to be an inherently *human* activity, a practice both 'natural' and culturally-productive, the concept of meaning allows us to say, effectively, that we (architects) are not them (the tree-dwellers or cave-furnishers). A metaphysical boundary arises, that requires theoretical policing. Is speculative building, for instance, an aspect of economic processes deemed 'natural' or an assault on aesthetic requisites? Is the concept of comfort, ergonomically verifiable or culturally determined? Laugier's primitive hut was criticised on the grounds that it was ultimately unrealistic to trace the origin of architecture to its formal principles to the neglect of cultural influences. Vidler notes such criticism in the writings of Veil de Saint-Maux who suggests that to hold a belief in such primitive functionalism would be much like conceiving the origins of music in "the first noise heard by men, whether of the Cuckoo, the Owl, the Cock, the Bull, or the Ass." [8]

Just as the feral child becomes a means for policing the domains of biological and cultural determinisms in Classical thought and subsequently in the human sciences, the concept of building type provides a means for differentiating between the scientific and the artful in architectural inquiry, between reason and applied technique, between form and its possible functions and form with its expressive possibilities. The belief in nature as either a world available to scientific certainty or as ideal was important to the development of specialised structures for housing plants, animals and humans in the 19th century. The reconciliation of biological needs to human purposes explains why the middle decades of the 19th century are a confusing time for historians for whom such structures as the *Crystal Palace* appear as a building

type as my own research has attempted to show. The 1830s and 40s, during which many of the large iron and glass structures were built and the 1850s during which the private conservatory becomes ever more popular confuse a straight-forward 'reading' of their underlying function as either scientific laboratory or social arena. But then, the Crystal Palace and glasshouse, like other 'new' building types of the 19th century, have no particularly appropriate place, no intrinsic function or inherently correct form - only the expectations of designers, scientists, popular writers, historians and theorists that they do.

The view of language that supported the education of Victor, yet another wild boy, one brought to Paris in 1800, is similar to that which supported debates over function and style in the 19th century and retains a certain value today, a linguistic model very much within the Classical tradition of Locke and Condillac. This is to say that language is conceived of as a means of representing an extant reality through what is taken to be its essentially propositional nature. Ian Hunter[9] suggests that such traditional accounts of language as they have been deployed in the history and philosophy of science present an obstacle when trying to describe the material conditions of knowledges or disciplines, conditions which are not reducible to the idea of 'consciousness' or of the 'mind.' The linguistic model makes it difficult, in other words, to express what architects know in terms of what architects do, to relate theoretical constructs to practical concerns. For many, as Hunter writes:

*language is that point of contact between the laws of thought and the order of things and this point of contact or mediation is handled by various concepts of meaning. For us, it is simply a given that words express meanings and that meanings are nothing other than the relation between thought and things.*[10]

This view of the combinatorial essence of language is deployed by various architectural theorists to define the parameters of the discipline and corresponds to a number of similar attempts to obtain epistemological certainty. Within architecture as a hermeneutic "tradition," one that has been "historically-constituted" to quote Colquhoun,[11] the model of language - of forms and ornamental details that perform propositional roles and a visual vocabulary that can be 'read' - provides the 'ground,' sought by many theorists and historians, "against which to measure and evaluate the contingencies of the present."[12] Venturi, in *Complexity and Contradiction,*[13] makes obvious use of a linguistic model to discuss the

relationship of modernist facades to building interiors. The modernist architects, he argues sought to make of the exterior a signifier of an interior signified. Together, exterior and interior form Saussure's notion of the sign. The exterior predicates or proposes to the viewer an immediate connection with the interior. Aspects of the post-structuralist critique of the sign and its pre-supposed meaning and the associated denial of such grounding emphasise, by and large, the representative role of language. In the Parc de la Villette project, Tschumi attempts to disrupt the transparency of language and meaning. The point-like follies of the la Villette represent not clearly identifiable functional essences, but stops - traces - along a process of the endless referral of meaning. Representation (as well as its subversion) and meaning (as well as its deferral) link what Venturi thought to be 'architecture' and what Tschumi has since revealed to be what 'architecture' is not.

One problem with the use of theoretical models based on predication and positing the combinatorial form of thought are the enforced binarisms which result. These models rely upon a view of knowledge that posits a distinction between theory and objective reality and this is where a consideration of meaning, as the link between a concept, building or detail and some aspect of the the world becomes problematic. It relies upon an empiricist conception of knowledge. Empiricism posits - through terms of an epistemology - the conditions in which knowledge is valid, the means through which knowledge and objective reality are related. In other words:

*epistemology confronts a fundamental problem of circularity in that its theory of knowledge logically presupposes a knowledge of the conditions in which knowledge takes place, that is, of the terms of the opposition, 'subject' and 'object,' and of the character of the relation between them.*[14]

Moreover - and this is a more 'real' problem when arguing the relevance of the study of architecture - the linguistic model excludes the analysis of historical change and societal influence from the range of dualistic equations, hence the ensuing host of reductive misnomers that follow, from those mysterious "productive processes" effecting the signifier[15] to those "monetary pressures" imposing themselves on the signified.[16]

Admittedly, I have oversimplified a number of issues surrounding the use of such concepts as language, representation, and meaning by associating them with the general attempt to cast architecture, as a

discipline, in terms of the sign and proposition, the subject and object. However, the countless pages devoted to such issues as representation, the possibility of an architectural vocabulary, a vernacular or national style, and the continued emphasis on meaning in architectural discourse I find an attempt to solve philosophically, a number of 'problems' which are the consequence of diverse knowledges and practices, which in total cannot be subsumed by a single discipline called architecture.

I must agree, moreover, with Hacking[17] that such problems as representation as a general theoretical concern are largely of limited consequence, a reflection of the concern of the historian and theorists for philosophical issues. What is significant about language, as with epistemology, is that these analyses correspond to other practices which support them: the specialist training of historians and theorists in the use of method, the rise of historical societies and journals, the rise of institutional and governmental support for practices requiring these analyses. As representations of a real world - in whatever way one wishes to conceptualise them - they are representations nonetheless "chosen by social pressures."[18] Content is inseparable from the manner in which one is trained to look. This is to say that the 'reading' of buildings involves not so much an act of recognition, but a process of discrimination - the nominating of distinctions.

Whether discussing man in the jungle or the jungle in man, the primitive hut in a nature or nature in the glasshouse - each instance presupposes a rigid distinction between the human and the natural, between buildings as biological or habitational necessities or architecture as cultural practice. These distinctions depend upon the further presupposition that such things as building types or cultural artefacts called huts and glasshouses exist in themselves. These objects provide the raw material for various forms of knowledge. Through these myths and figures: the wild man, the primitive hut, the Crystal Palace, nature and culture are constructed as discrete entities, becoming central to the study of ourselves, a study however inconclusive.

NOTES

1    F. Delaporte, *Nature's Second Kingdom* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1982)

2    G. Canguilhem, *Ideology and Rationality in the History of the Life Sciences* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1988)

3   Linnaeus cited, R. Harvey Gibson, *Outlines of the History of Botany* (New York: Arno Press, 1981), p. 72.

4   P. Hirst and P. Woolley, "Nature and Culture in Social Science: the Demarcation of Domains of Being in Eighteenth Century and Modern Discourses," *Geoforum* (1985), v. 16, n. 2, p. 152.

5   Defoe cited, E. Dudley and M. Novak, *The Wild Man Within: an Image in Western Thought from the Renaissance to Romanticism* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973), p. 196.

6   Hirst and Woolley, "Nature and Culture in Social Science," p. 153.

7   Starobinski cited, G. Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological* (New York: Zone Books, 1989), p. 242.

8   A. Vidler, "Rebuilding the Primitive Hut," *The Writing of the Walls* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Architectural Press, 1987), p. 21.

9   I. Hunter, "Michel Foucault: Discourse versus language," (unpublished paper delivered at Griffith University, Australia 1984), p. 1.

10  Hunter, "Michel Foucault: Discourse versus language," p. 1.

11  A. Colquhoun, *Essays in Architectural Criticism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press 1981), pp. 14-15.

12  Colquhoun, *Essays in Architectural Criticism* p. 15.

13  Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1977).

14  B. Hindess, *Philosophy and methodology in the social sciences* (Sussex: Harvester, 1977), p. 134.

15  Colquhoun, *Essays in Architectural Criticism*

16  M. Bandini, "Typology as a Form of Convention," *AA Files* (1984), n. 6.

17  I. Hacking, "Michel Foucault: Discourse versus language," (unpublished paper delivered at Griffith University, Australia 1984), p. 13.

18  I. Hacking, *Representing and Intervening* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 144.