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## Love's labour's lost: Alberto Pérez-Gómez's *Polyphilo*

INTERSTICES 23

Alberto Pérez-Gómez's *Polyphilo, or The Dark Forest revisited, An Erotic Epiphany of Architecture* (1992), is a curious text in the context of architectural theory, and in particular, when considered against that from the last thirty years.<sup>1</sup> Overtly it is a commentary and emendation on the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499, 1999) attributed to Francis Colonna, a Renaissance text that describes a sequence of experiences of a mythical character, Poliphilo.<sup>2</sup> The original text describes the picaresque adventures of a Renaissance figure who, having fallen asleep at the edge of a forest, wakes to experience a procession of architectural spectacles that function as allegories of the role of architecture as a scene for human experience. Pérez-Gómez's text emulates the journey of the hero in the original, but relocates it into the context of the liminal zone of an airport and the procedural and alienating experiences of travelling by air. In doing so, Pérez-Gómez is able to comment on the simultaneously desirable and repelling aspects of machinic alienation and the consequences for empathic approaches to architecture in general. While the contemporary text is perhaps not as well known as its Renaissance model, it is evident from the numerous references to it in the work of Pérez-Gómez, culminating in both the *Polyphilo* book and the more critical *Built Upon Love, Architectural Longing After Ethics and Aesthetics* (2006), that the older work exercises a unique and pivotal influence on Pérez-Gómez's general program to identify and expound on the idea of *poiesis* in architecture, or what may be thought of as 'poetic' aesthetic responses to the effects architecture on an individual.

Unquestionably, for the community of scholars that have emerged around the History and Theory Program at McGill University—where Pérez-Gómez has been a professor for 37 years—and more generally for the interpretive critical material published in the volumes of *Chora*, the journal he co-edited, the examination of architectural texts from history has been a foundational practice. In this respect, and in response to the consistent messaging from Pérez-Gómez that a form of 'love' should be present in architecture, it is appropriate to examine both the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, and Pérez-Gómez's *Polyphilo* and *Built Upon Love*, to better understand what his concept of 'love' means ethically and sensually for architectural design.

In furtherance of this, I would like to examine the emphasis Pérez-Gómez places on architectural narrative, and in particular the narratological aspects that he employs in *Polyphilo* to both reference the original text, but also to develop a commentary on the value of this story-form in contemporary late-modern experience. *Polyphilo*, as Pérez-Gómez, notes in his introduction is concerned with an ethical posture for architecture:

We learn from the *Hypnerotomachia* as soon as we reject any homogenizing reading and posit a perceptual faith, accepting that there is meaning however weak, in the original. The essential intention is to articulate a possible ethical position through a narrative that acknowledges important models for the practice of architecture is still valid. This is particularly in view of the current philosophic understanding of truth—shared by Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Gianni Vattimo—as set into work by art, and of a diagnosis of the postmodern condition in which the only alternative to the strong Being of traditional religion and science seems to be the weak truth that shines forth through recollection of historical works.<sup>3</sup>

Weakness, or the concept of a minor position, here means the development of explanatory schemas that can be relied on to provide insight into a question without necessarily attempting to define and confirm an orthodox position. For Pérez-Gómez, a 'weak truth' in fact carries great significance because it seeks to demonstrate an 'ethical' position for promoting the revelatory aspects of the 'art' of architecture distinct from more orthodox knowledge systems. In Pérez-Gómez's view these systems are defined as the systemic outcomes of religious and scientific (empirical and rational) rules of evidence and general applicability. The ethical position he outlines is complex, but in essence it conflates an individual's empathetic aesthetic engagement of an architectural work (those aspects of architecture that are irreducible to categorisation) with an obligation to prioritise these experiences as the most singular and valuable aspects of architectural practice. It is personal commitment to an individually nuanced aesthetic experience that defines an ethics of engagement. More simply still, Pérez-Gómez feels that the indescribable aspects of human love are the most important values when feeling engages with architecture.

Pérez-Gómez has developed this argument over a considerable number of publications, the initial and most authoritative being his *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* (1983).<sup>4</sup> Very generally, since the discussion Pérez-Gómez brings to the description of the aesthetic attitude towards architecture involves a broad array of historical references, he asserts that the prime function of the architect within pre-Modern society was to act as an agent of poetic expression. Speaking of the Renaissance architect (and hence the reader of the *Hypnerotomachia*), he writes:

[...] the Renaissance was a profoundly traditional world. Liberated from theological determinism, the architect became conscious of his power to transform the physical world. He was often a magus, but his intention was reconciliatory; art was a privileged form of metaphysics—metaphysics made into matter.<sup>5</sup>

The architect, he asserts, recognises the fundamental distinctions within the Vitruvian triad of *venustas*, *firmitas* and *utilitas*, and in particular, understands the importance of *venustas*. For Pérez-Gómez, this is *poiesis*. Implicit within his

discussion of this attitude and the historical examples he calls on, is the sincere lament that the emergence of forms of technical rigour (*firmitas*) and economic rationality (*utilitas*) have eroded the value of the beautiful (*venustas*). In this context we can ask why, in writing *Polyphilo*, Pérez-Gómez created a simulacrum of the *Hypnerotomachia*? It is a reasonable and timely ambition to see if the same emotional disposition present in the original could be translated into the current (post) modern world of discourse. Was it to confirm the adjacency of aesthetics and ethics in architectural experience, compelling architects to deeply commit to their individual values, or was it to personally document, as the text says, “a personal erotic epiphany of architecture”?<sup>6</sup>

The *Polyphilo* itself cleaves quite closely to the original text in terms of the overall narrative arc, but there are clear distinctions of emphasis in the modern version. The general tale of the main protagonist falling asleep and dreaming of a series of staged encounters is maintained, though the question of whether he is sleeping is less clear in *Polyphilo* than it is in the *Hypnerotomachia*. The minor narrative, the meeting of Polia and Polyphilo, their separation and then reunion, is also mirrored, but without the same force, and in the end, with a different outcome, discussed below. Ultimately, the texts differ significantly since the evocation of mechanical flight and the industrial management of travel is unique in the *Polyphilo*, though the concept of a ‘fever dream’ remains in both. Pérez-Gómez is conflating the strangely dislocated experience of contemporary air travel with the same experience a Renaissance traveller would encounter setting off into a unknown and wondrous landscape. As will be argued below, the approach to textual and visual information differs significantly in both texts, and it is fair to say that there are strands of obscurantism in *Polyphilo* that come from the authorial style of Pérez-Gómez. Whether this impediment to a clear and unambiguous reading is deliberate, or potentially the result of contemporary interests in literary deconstruction in the 1990s, or even an attempt to emulate the allegorical nature of Renaissance treatises, the consequence is that the text requires a close reading in order to be unpacked. To achieve this, and to bring out the consequences of Pérez-Gómez’s interests in ‘love’ and architecture, it is important to have the benefit of a more orthodox (if this is possible) presentation of the relationship between eros and architecture in Pérez-Gómez’s subsequent writings.

### Built upon love

Pérez-Gómez’s later text, *Built Upon Love* (2006), explores the allusions towards a form of emotive and aesthetically attuned response to aspects of the beautiful, and elaborates on the consequences for architecture.<sup>7</sup> Relying on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s analysis of Hegel’s philosophy of art, and in particular the proposition that art is the “sensuous expression of the Idea,”<sup>8</sup> Pérez-Gómez asserts that *Eros* is at work in the beginnings of things, in short is at the heart of the act of creation.<sup>9</sup> Taking cues from Plato’s *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, Pérez-Gómez compares filial with erotic love, traversing the subtle similarities of both but ultimately landing on the proposition that architectural creation requires a ‘loving’ disposition towards the act of making. This general disposition is, following Plato, that the primal animating force towards the craft of thinking, the question ‘Why do we think?’ can be translated onto the question in architecture ‘Why do we make?’ On the other hand, for Pérez-Gómez, where Plato is explicit on the love of technical knowledge towards those seemingly immeasurable aspects of sensation and

feeling, the multiplicity of the aesthetic experience towards architecture needs to be retained, especially in our current circumstance which he considers to be compromised by technical and instrumental questions.<sup>10</sup> His general premise is that the rationalisation of the process of 'creating,' implicit within architecture within a modern framework, is fatally demythologizing and hence devoid of the appropriate philosophical comportment towards the act and object of creation.

Pérez-Gómez's argument is that desire remains, but in our current scientifically-inflected orientation, is unfulfilled though the instrumental and reductive processes shaping modern experience. This amounts to a rehearsal of the familiar argument considering the alienation of creative labour from the context in which making/creating is practised. Generally Pérez-Gómez's takes an apolitical point of view in his consideration of the effects of modernity given his desire to discuss those aspects of architecture that are philosophically autonomous and connected to the classical philosophical tradition. Yet architecture goes on, buildings are designed and constructed and, presumably, the results of many 'makings' are the occasional fulfillments of 'loving' creations in our present, modern circumstances. As he outlines in the opening essay in the journal *Chora*, setting the tone and direction for the journal, but also confirming a disposition towards the ontological framing of architectural experience:

To repeat: during the past two centuries, all art forms—including literature, music, sculpture, painting, and, more recently, film and other hybrids—seem to be emphatically about space, about *chora*. It is the imagining self (not identical, of course to the Cartesian *ego cogito*) that, both as creator and as spectator, can inhabit through these works a world already beyond the future-orientation of modernity, where the notion of progress has collapsed and yet the narrative function, with its vectors of recollection and projection, remains the only alternative to articulate ethical action, an appropriate choreography for a postmodern world.<sup>11</sup>

It is from this context that Pérez-Gómez's *Polyphilo* fiction and the subsequent *Built Upon Love* emerges. If the opportunity exists to translate the considerable scholarship and, indeed, love for architecture in his work, then it is worth considering how Pérez-Gómez thought the 'narrative function' might work. As we asked at the beginning, the question of how a fictional account of the experience of architecture (*Polyphilo*) can legitimately express these emotive forms is clearly relevant to how we experience and understand architecture. Ultimately too, as we shall see, it may be beneficial to see if there are contemporary instances that demonstrate a heightened empathetic register and activate those aspects of narratorial communication that go beyond 'recollection and projection.'

### Communicative aims—carving

Arguably, and this is a measured criticism, one can acknowledge that Pérez-Gómez's critique of modernity legitimately laments the diminution of aesthetic fullness in architecture, however we have to question who the audience is for this position. Is Pérez-Gómez making an erudite protest against the onslaught of a reductive and uncritical culture at large, or is he speaking (or writing) to a limited circle of academics committed to bibliophilic culture?<sup>12</sup> If the *Polyphilo* and *Built Upon Love* texts fail to speak to those parts of the architectural community that have actual agency in making contemporary architecture (the larger community

of architecture), is there nonetheless the opportunity to touch on aspects of the human condition, including empathy and the 'love' of works of architecture that are still being felt? I think there is, but the path to it may be different to that presented by Pérez-Gómez. Part of the challenge for his posture towards the continued championing of the empathetic (or more precisely *Einfühlung* in the sense expressed by Theodor Lipps and Wilhelm Worringer) is that he limits the experience to the pre-digital.<sup>13</sup> Pointedly, there are a number of dismissive references by Pérez-Gómez to the advent of digital culture within architectural practice, particularly to the emergence of a culture of formal experimentation.<sup>14</sup> Fusing the idea of intellectually 'making' and 'inhabiting' with the spatial implications of *chora*, I would like to term the practice of creating these conceptual spaces 'carving.' So, if the path towards a loving engagement with architecture is a 'carving' of the *chora*/space, as above, then what are the behaviours that are encompassed within this 'carving'? It is fair to state that while some architects physically build or construct their work, most don't, so the 'carving' is essentially an abstract form of material shaping, conveyed through conventional forms of representation, and also through the practice of rhetorically shaping experiences through language. While the first instance of 'carving' is familiar, it is the formalist practice of shape-making that digital culture has afforded architecture, rhetorical 'carving' is less well understood. As I will hopefully demonstrate later, to rhetorically 'carve' a relationship to architecture is to employ the instruments of language, narratology, to shape a form of empathy to a project. Connecting Pérez-Gómez's concerns with instrumentalising aspects of modernity to the challenge of crafting architecture, he creates a very specific form of architectural narrative, the *Polyphilo*. But how does the narrative of *Polyphilo* express this, how is 'loving' a process? To answer this, and to get to the point at which rhetorical 'carving' is explicit, it is worth examining the original narrative of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphilo* and comparing it to the *Polyphilo*.

### **Analysing the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphilo***

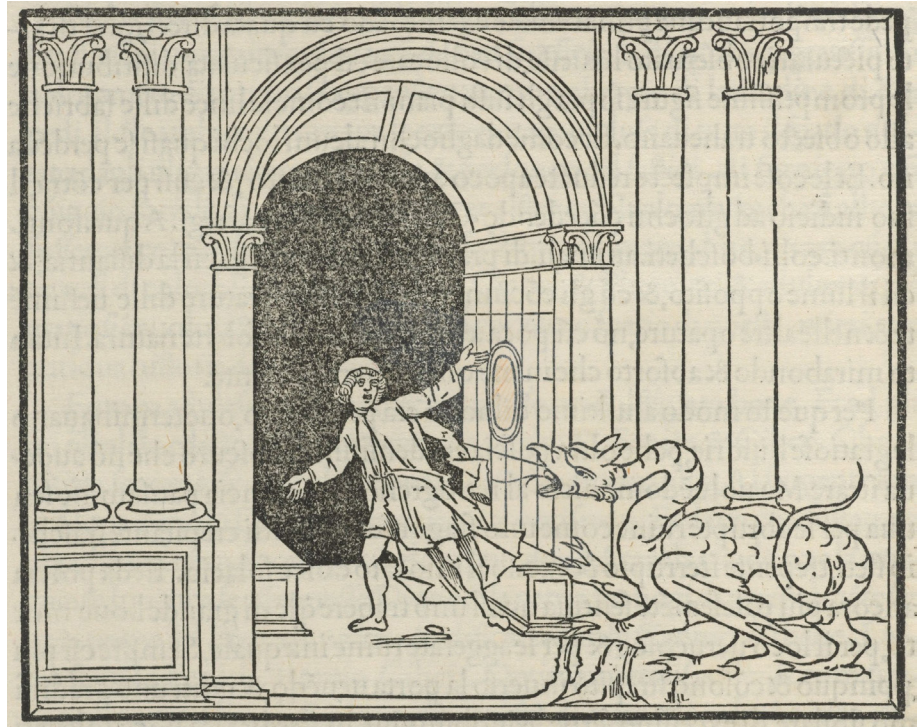
James C O'Neill in his comprehensive analysis of the text argues that the narrative of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphilo* is, to the degree that this can be a narrative, a recitation of various alchemical, mystical and neo-Platonic transformations of gnosis/knowledge.<sup>15</sup> As a recitation it is not necessarily a good narrative, but it has the characteristics of being sequential and (somewhat) causal, meaning that the sequence of events that confront Poliphilo are a product of an exercise in scholastic disputation culminating in a transformation of the self towards a full self-realisation. In essence the narrative of the book matches the transformations of the literate reader through the autodidactic transformation of the 'soul' via a 'path' to knowledge—you become what you read via an academic path to self-knowledge, echoing Seneca's familiar idea of the *vita otiosa* (life of leisurely contemplation).

O'Neill implies that the initial state of being that Colonna describes relates to surface impressions, mirroring the initial state of the soul in the *Timaeus*. However, it is in the evolution from external appearances to interior apperception that the most significant changes take place:

Lastly, let us consider how the author is using narrative tools to aid the reader's relationship with Poliphilo's pedestrian journey of self-transformation.

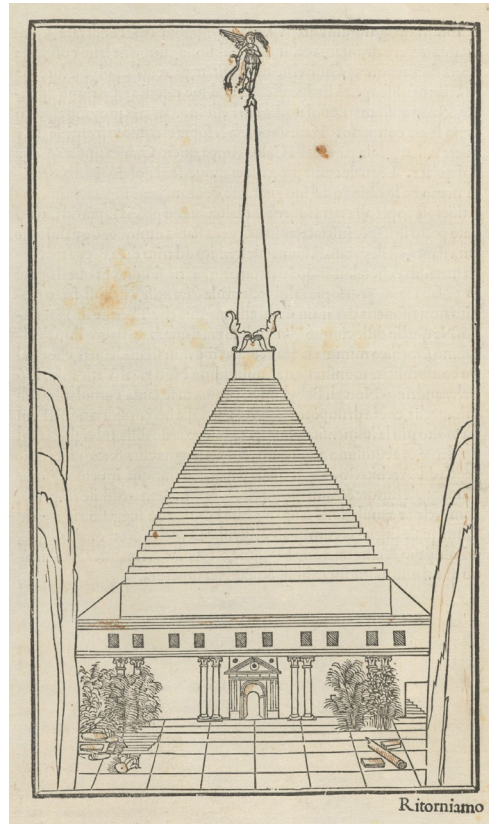
For instance, the narrative is a macro-structural succession of allegorical sequences that do not depict scenes indicative of a psychological portrait of either the protagonist or other significant characters through dialogue, as for example in Chaucer's *Troilus*. Conversely, the author is concerned moreover with a metanarrative in which Poliphilo is positioned and must comprehend the metaphorical sequences around him, in order for the narrative to proceed as a reflection of his own advancing interiority from unwise to wise. On this basis, action and formal contextualisation are intimately related, outwardly portraying Poliphilo's inner motions of his soul.<sup>16</sup>

Fig. 1: *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499), Poliphilo encounters the Dragon [Source: *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (Amsterdam) and Da Capo Press (New York), 1968]



In the narrative of the *Hypnerotomachia*, the transformation from base urges (the dragon, the monstrous) to states of enlightenment is the spine of the narrative, including the contest between desire and love in the relations between Poliphilo and Polia. This supervening of the senses expresses a path to self-knowledge that sits centrally in forms of Christian mysticism that allegorise the human body as a site of transformation. For example, and most famously, there is a direct continuity in this respect from the writings of Hildegard of Bingen in the twelfth century to the mystical descriptions of the transportation of the soul towards divinity in St Teresa of Avila's *The Interior Castle* (1588), and in particular her vision of a crystal structure.<sup>17</sup> In these forms of psychical change, the emotional commitment towards a rapturous state (eros for Pérez-Gómez; enlightenment and revelation for others) is fully allegorised as a process of transformation that is emotive, phenomenologically intense, and ultimately rewarding. In summary the intention within the *Hypnerotomachia*, like that of *The Interior Castle*, is always directed towards personal revelation employing the analogies of architecture as an allegory for the embodied aspects of reason, faith, and revelation. For later readers of the *Hypnerotomachia*, up to and including Pérez-Gómez, the text tantalisingly offers a model for imbuing the act of design and the effects of architecture with a corresponding transformation of the self.

Fig. 2: *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499), The Pyramid and Obelisk [Source: *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (Amsterdam) and Da Capo Press (New York), 1968]



### Diagrams vs. ekphrases

In particular, the role of the illustrations within the *Hypnerotomachia* is crucial in illustrating the complex descriptions contained within the text. There are a considerable number of passages describing architecture in various states, from broad outlines of building mass and location to granular descriptions of carvings, statuary, and architectural details. In addition, though it is not comprehensively expressed, there are also references to garden design and the botanical identity of plants. Interestingly, and significantly, the most important thing about the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphilo* is that the illustrations provide a diagrammatic enactment of the experience. They objectify an interior experience, the approach towards knowledge by Poliphilo by expressly illustrating this experience, sometimes from a single point-of-view, and sometimes from a third-person perspective. To us this is possibly unproblematic given our familiarity with graphic forms of visual communication, however in the context of contemporary manuscripts, the illustrations serve the purpose of visualising the complex architectural and scenographic descriptions. As I argue below, the provision of images and their capacity to exceed the text is a crucial moment in architectural representation.

The images of the *Hypnerotomachia* perform a distinctly different function from the workshop manuals and then contemporary treatises of Alberti's *De re aedificatoria* (1452) and the courtly imagination of Filarete's *Trattato di architettura* (1464) since the purpose of images within these texts (such as they were) is to provide an objective rendering of specific conditions rather than the turbulent emotional and psychological experiences attributed to Poliphilo.<sup>18</sup> Hence

## TRIUMPHVS



Sopra de questo superbo & Triumphale uectabulo, uidi uno bianchissimo Cycno, negli amorosi amplexi duna inclyta Nympha filiola de Theseo, dimcredibile bellezza formata, & cum el diuino rostro obscuro lantise, demisise le ale, tegeua le parte denudate della igenua Hera, Et cū diuini & uoluptici oblectamenti istauano delectabilmente iucundissimi ambi connexi, Et el diuino Olore tra le delicate & niuee coxe collocato. Laquale commodamente sedeuo sopra dui Puluini di panno doro, exquisitamente di mollicula lanugine tomentati, cum tutti gli sumptuosi & ornanti correlarii opportuni. Et ella induta de uesta Nympha le subtile, de serico bianchissimo cum trama doro texto praelucente

Agli loci competenti elegante ornato de petre pretiose.

Sencia defecto de qualunque cosa che ad incremento

di dilecto uenustamente concorre. Summa

mente agli intuenti conspicuo & delectabile.

Cum tutte le parteche

al primo fue descritto

dilaudè & plauso.

\*

## SECUNDVS



EL TERTIO caeleste triumpho seguuiua cum quatro uertibilerote di Chryfolitho æthiopicò scintule doro flammigante, Traiecta per el quale la seta del A fello gli maligni dæmonii fuga, Alla leua mano grato, cum tutto quello ch'è di sopra di rote e dicto. Daposcia le asfule sue in ambito per el modo compacte sopra narrato, erano di uirente Helitropia Cyprico, cum potere negli lumi caelesti, el suo gestate cœla, & il diuinare dona, di fanguinee guttule punctulato.

Offeriua tale historiato inculpto la tabella dextra. Vno homo di regia maiestate isigne, Oraua in uno sacro templo el diuo simulacro, quello che della formosissima fiola deueua seguire. Sentendo el patre la cœctione sua per ella del regno. Et ne per alcuno fusse preгна, Fece

una munita structura di una excelsa torre, Et in quella cum

solène custodia la fece inclaufurare. Nella quale

ella cessabonda assedèdo, cum ex-

cessiuo solatio, nel uirgineo

sino gutte dor

ro stillare

uecte

ua.

\*

Fig. 3, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499), The Second Triumph [Source: *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (Amsterdam) and *Da Capo Press* (New York), 1968]

the images in the *Hypnerotomachia* function in the manner of visual narratives (graphic novels in contemporary parlance) in which the tensions between abstract imagery and narratological sequentiality were first being explored in print format in the fifteenth century. David Kunzle famously identified the beginnings of graphic narrative culture (comics in his expression) in the late medieval period, identifying a visual tradition of depicting moral tales and lives of Saints in sequential visual narratives, produced courtesy of the emergent printing capacities in the fifteenth century.<sup>19</sup> To be clear, this development does not represent the 'invention' of visual narratives since this had already been well established in both painterly and ecumenical contexts, it is particular to print media. Considered from this perspective the *Hypnerotomachia*, because it is so lavishly illustrated, has more in common with these early visual narratives than with the architectural treatises mentioned earlier. What it establishes is that the *ekphrastic* or vivid description of architectural locations can be meaningfully amplified by the provision of imagery, and that there is a form of assessment that supplements, and in part suppresses, imaginative engagement. The technical complexity of the descriptions, because they are arguably too difficult to hold in the imagination and are the consequence of a complex emotional transformation, require the illustrations as a test of the authenticity of the text.



### ***Polyphilo***

In the case of Pérez-Gómez's *Polyphilo*, reading it is a challenge. Even with the prior knowledge of the general outline of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphilo*, Pérez-Gómez's text sets out to portray the inherent sense of dislocation within the Renaissance text. Ostensibly *Polyphilo* employs the same fundamental relationship between the protagonist and the world, that it is inexplicable at first, but ultimately revelatory, however in Pérez-Gómez's text he does not develop the narrative as a demonstration of a transformation in thinking. His text describes experiences, but is obscure in its sense of location, continuity and interactions between characters. As a record of personal identity and a form of 'inner voice' it demonstrates a form of stream of consciousness, in the manner, but perhaps without the sophistication, of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. That said, the end notes that are referenced for each chapter describe a connoisseur's appreciation of references from the history of European modernism's avant-garde, from literary references to art-based items that have clearly contributed to the narrative itself.

### **Difference between *Hypnerotomachia Poliphilo* and Pérez-Gómez's *Poliphilo/Polyphilo***

Herein lies the principal difference between Pérez-Gómez's text and the *Hypnerotomachia*—with its manifest care in developing an integration between neo-platonic exercises that develop forms of self-awareness via the practice of aligning measure, three dimensional solids and grouped categories of thinking and experience. The *Hypnerotomachia Poliphilo* is an instruction manual directed towards self-revelation and the use of the hierarchy of material and intellectual epistemologies in Renaissance thought. Like other triadic values, there is the dependence on Intellect, Imagination and Memory to attain these states. Ultimately in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphilo* there is the recognition, and reconciliation, of the triumph of the metaphysical reflection over everyday quotidian experience. The *Hypnerotomachia* is an instruction manual on the development of abstract, neo-platonic values within the self as much as it is a narrative of the temporal, albeit dreamlike, experiences of the main character Poliphilo.

The difference for Pérez-Gómez in his *Polyphilo* is that the instructive elements, if it can be said that they exist in the text, appear in the endnotes to each of the chapters. The citing of referents, as before, are not intrinsic to the text since they do not serve as contemporaneous illustrations as in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphilo*, but as suppressed characteristics more to be intuited, or perhaps relied on as an afterthought, than as critical elements. For example, the description of the dismemberment of bodies in Chapter 19 are a combination of responses to the paintings of Paul Delvaux, the Belgian Surrealist painter and the images of Hans Bellmer, the German Surrealist multi-format artist, as well as references to Georges Bataille's oneiric novella, *The Story of the Eye*. Clearly for Pérez-Gómez, these are intuitive prompts of great substance and has animated his text, but there is no clear understanding available as to why this imagery is selected at this time—other than that the general descriptions of death and destruction that occur within the overall narrative of the chapter speak to his general evocation of dystopic angst in the book overall.

### How is this concerned with ethics, and indeed with the argument for love?

For Pérez-Gómez, there seems to be the melancholic recognition in *Polyphilo* that the courtly narrative arc of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphilo* cannot translate into a technological world, our world, dominated by instruments of destruction and alienation. Towards the end of the work, he describes a world in which the project of self-realisation of the original is replaced by a spectacle of destruction. Pérez-Gómez's text comes with a built-in technological aversion: the insubstantial and transitive nature of desire and physical consummation that comes at the end of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphilo* is replaced with the atrocities of torture and dismemberment, and ultimately, the death of Polyphilo in the presence of an indifferent Poly who is herself transforming into a form of pilot, half human-half machine. Ultimately, both Polyphilo and Poly are reborn (resurrected in Polyphilo's case) and are united at the end, but the insubstantiality expressed in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphilo* and directed at the resolution of the process of thinking, is considerably more drawn out by Pérez-Gómez in his own text. Whether it is also intended to act as *quod erat demonstrandum* (and thus it is demonstrated) is to be debated. Is Pérez-Gómez's final act a resolute summary of eschatological destruction, or a form of *deus ex machina* contrived to end the narrative? The final passages of *Polyphilo* describe a form of apotheosis of the main character, 'The Lover', resembling the inscrutable final scenes of other mystical narratives such as Stanley Kubrick's *2001, A Space Odyssey* (1968).

So, in my view, the argument for love conquering the vicissitudes of the technological world is somewhat muted when we come to the end of *Polyphilo*. Because the narrative does not follow a conventional story arc and provide the types of character resolution everyday story-forms generally provide we are left with the question of how the fate of Pérez-Gómez's characters represent a resolution of his general antipathy towards Modernity's objectification and commodification of authenticity. His position is that the instruments of modern rationality, including most particularly architecture's embrace of digital culture, can only be overcome through a re-embrace of ethical desire. He seems to be saying, in my view, that to love architecture you must do so with a deep, Heideggerian form of authenticity. In the *Polyphilo*, this position is shown rather than argued given the curiously fictional nature of the text. This position is made clearer and expressed more conventionally in a subsequent book, *Built on Love* (2006). Towards the end of this book, Pérez-Gómez summarizes his argument in part. He says:

The main concern of architectural discourse is *ethical*, seeking to find appropriate language that may frame a project in view of the common good, a language always specific to each task at hand [...] Like literature and film, architecture finds its ethical *praxis* in its poetic and critical ability to address the questions that truly matter for our humanity in culturally specific terms, revealing the enigmas behind everyday events and objects.<sup>20</sup>

Speaking of the value of an hermeneutical approach to understanding architecture, specifically its context of production, Pérez-Gómez goes on to acknowledge that this will involve a relativist ethical position:

Within this framework of understanding, ethics appears not through norms or generalities but through stories that focus on specific works and individuals.<sup>21</sup>

In part his conception of 'stories' is an extension of the idea of a program, the imagined human experiences and situations a work of architecture might play host to. This translates as a glossary of ambitions for a building—that a work of architecture provides a way to ensure phenomenological experiences be elevated to the status of an ethical encounter. In essence there is a symbiotic relationship between words and form, much like a hand in a glove, that socializes the abstract material conditions of architecture through language generally and via narratives in particular. It is Pérez-Gómez's concern, I believe, that he feels this language is currently merely descriptive or, at best, self referentially concerned with subjects without relevance to the core ethical values that sustain architecture, its *praxis*. In my view, Pérez-Gómez's argument suggests that much of contemporary practice is not directed by an ethics of 'love' towards the effects of the discipline, nor does it search for the 'enigmas behind everyday events and objects.' Taken in the context of Pérez-Gómez's *Polyphilo*, with its ambitions to bring the poetic into a modern idiom, this means that he has not seen evidence of narratives that articulate the deep and complex relationship possible with the historical legacy of architecture. How, for instance, are we to engage with the work of Borromini? How do we bring it meaningfully into contemporary experience in a fashion that is effective? This is a general problem for history/theory streams within practice and education, but one acutely felt in Pérez-Gómez's work.

Implicit in this conceptual stance is the concern that language, and in particular the language of architectural theory, needs to find a way to speak of values and experiences that supervene everyday descriptions and participate in the textual richness that poetic language forms. The most important parts of the modernity that Pérez-Gómez generally finds unsatisfying is that which resists, like many before him, its absorption into a banal economy of redundant and tedious 'value management.'

And that appears to be the summation of his approach insofar as he outlines an ethical position. The preceding argument for a fulsome approach to architecture that demonstrates the sensuousness of eros and the motivating forces of desire, a desire towards architecture as a material transformation of the world balanced on the situational judgement, the ethics, of the enlightened practitioner.

### **Ethics and narratives I—why the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphilo***

So, we can ask whether a relativist ethics is sufficiently robust to withstand the criticism that it is merely opportunistic or worse, self-serving and solipsistic. It is reasonable to be critical of unifying theories that attempt to corral approaches to design under a single, self-referential and internally consistent value scheme, but the alternative is equally unattractive and simply unrealistic. As a social activity, architecture is the outcome of exceptionally complex value judgements, some of which are consistent with context and some of which are opportunistically idiosyncratic. Sorting the hierarchy of values is part of the operation of teams in producing architectural outcomes, the argument being that architecture is distinguished by the depth and complexity of this process. Given this perspective, what is Pérez-Gómez asking for, or encouraging?

In part it is the desire to reanimate historical matter, both material and textual that might otherwise be considered opaque and irrelevant in contemporary discourse. Pérez-Gómez is committed to the resuscitation of the Western

architectural tradition, in particular for work that pre-dates the emergence of industrialized modernity. At its simplest, his position imagines a world in which the canon of 'worthys', acknowledged and celebrated historical figures like Borromini, but including many others, can exercise equal influence and guidance today as contemporary 'starchitects.' I argue that despite the obvious gulf in historical and, most importantly, technological circumstances, his position is that the pre-modern amalgam of rhetoric, theology and natural philosophy has a power that modernity has, arguably, erased. The concept of *mythos* that he discusses at the beginning of *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* broadly captures that sense of syncretic purpose when architecture demonstrated 'order' at the same time as evoking a broad range of allusions to cultural continuity with the vast and mysterious world of Renaissance and Baroque symbology. The crisis he defines is a crisis of meaning. For Pérez-Gómez the ethical question he is asking refers to this *mythos*. In a world in which the management of information and actions is governed by tools designed to optimise utility, he argues for forms of intellectual continuity that bring this *mythos* back into current concerns. The question is, what is a contemporary *mythos*? In part, the text of Pérez-Gómez's *Polyphilo* is the answer to that question.

### Ethics and narratives II—why *Polyphilo*?

For Pérez-Gómez, the *Polyphilo* text is an attempt to demonstrate the role of narrative in contemporary architectural discourse. Like Le Corbusier's *Poème de L'Angle Droit*, it is a structured attempt to capture certain ideas about architecture in a positional relationship governed by, in the case of *Polyphilo*, the rehearsal of the original *Hypnerotomachia Poliphilo* story but with all of the stream of consciousness associations conjured up in Pérez-Gómez's narrative.

How is this ethical? For Pérez-Gómez ethics is, despite his insistence on openness, the outcome of a certain form of architectural connoisseurship centred on deep scholarship and the *philia*, the love, for the examples of work that are considered profound within a certain history of the discipline's broad history. It is overwhelmingly anchored to forms of classical scholarship and to certain moments in Western history, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment and aspects of the Modernist avant-garde, from which the core examples of his work are drawn.

To confirm this, Pérez-Gómez writes specifically on beauty and moral values and its basis in physiological desire:

Eros and the imagination are inextricably linked. This is more than a physiological fact. Our love of beauty is our desire to be whole and to be holy. Beauty transcends the contradiction of necessity and superfluity; it is both necessary for reproduction and crucial for our spiritual well-being, the defining characteristic of our humanity. Contrary to the view that there exists an irreconcilable contradiction between the poetic imagination and an ethics based on rationality and consensus, it is the lack of imagination that may be at the root of our worse moral failures.<sup>22</sup>

### Narratives

So, I would suggest that there is no disagreement with Pérez-Gómez's proposition that an ethical praxis is found in the analysis of the enigmatic aspects of

the world, but it is fair to ask what these enigmas might be, and whether they continue to present themselves in a consistent fashion—whether it is consistently enigmatic or enigmatically (in)consistent. For Pérez-Gómez, the existence of a hermetic text that alluded to arcane knowledge regarding the consistency between geometry, theology, and alchemical knowledge (the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphilo*) was enough to inspire his writing of *Polyphilo*. In its way it is the recognition that a picaresque narrative that so clearly incorporated architectural knowledge, and so evocatively described the sensuous effects of architecture, should be preserved and celebrated for a contemporary audience. I will leave it to others to decide whether Pérez-Gómez's text is successful in demonstrating its contemporary relevance, but we can also look beyond the model he has adopted and ask whether other forms of narrative are available for architectural consideration.

To do this, in our contemporary circumstances, it is worth examining the field of academic discussion concerning narratology for it is one thing to identify that a particular story has a narrative at a general level, but another to analyse exactly what narratological forms are being employed.

In recent years there has been significant developments in the identification of story-types within most media forms. From Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) to Christopher Booker's *The Seven Basic Plots* (2004) (amongst others), the recognition that stories generally follow a few basic plot types has allowed critical theorists to further analyse both those aspects that are consistent and those that diverge from standard forms.<sup>23</sup> It should be noted that these plot types are exceedingly general and, while literature and film and other narrative media can display consistencies that have been incorporated into our expectations regarding story arcs, it is in the minutiae within which these arcs are achieved that the principal pleasure is obtained.

The *Hypnerotomachia Poliphilo* itself falls into one of these categories. It resembles most closely the "Voyage and Return" type, or alternatively the "Quest," as Poliphilo embarks on a journey of self-discovery.<sup>24</sup> Yet simply asserting that the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphilo* has the same plot structure as the *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) or *Back to the Future* (1985), which are also demonstrations of this story-type, doesn't mean that they are convincingly linked and definitively organised according to a specific story-type taxonomy. On the contrary, the issue that narratologists have with these definitions is that they falsely assert similarities between works whose difference and idiosyncratic vision is paramount.

Narratology itself, like architecture, is a form of critical analysis and thinking that is premised in the material it scrutinizes. It looks to those works that, generally, are considered of value within literature and works from first principles to recognize and analyse those aspects of character, plot, voice, point of view, and other granular aspects of writing and reading that are demonstrated within the text. For this reason, it is essentially a community of investigation that exists in a tentative relationship to dominant discourses. While there is the recognition that there are many consistencies within literature, the great depth of the oeuvre is the diversity of demonstrations that can both confirm and challenge dominant discourses—similar to architecture. So, when the question of narrative is brought up in architecture, and in particular in examples such as the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphilo*, the question of what type and form of narrative is in play is crucial. It is

not simply enough to assert that a narrative exists; we might ask what narratological qualities are specifically being employed and to what purposes?

### Narrative events, time and spaces

The *Hypnerotomachia Poliphilo* contains a series of episodes that correspond to the narratological definition of “Events, or Eventfulness.”<sup>25</sup> This condition implies that the material being presented within the text contains information that is specifically and necessarily noteworthy and is included for the purpose of both descriptively creating a spatial and temporal context for the actions of the characters, Poliphilo in this instance, and the actions he undertakes and to which he is subject. As an architectural text we can presume that all parts of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphilo* are directed towards the description of architectural qualities that the reader can understand and respond to, including the contest between *mathemata* and emotion. By contrast the sequence of scenes within the modern text of *Polyphilo*, divided into 24 chapters corresponding to hours within a day, loosely present themselves as events. However, as discussed earlier, their ‘eventfulness’ generally lies in a tacit understanding of the literary and visual culture references loosely referred to in the chapter notes. While there are examples within modern literature of fragmented and impressionistic sequences of seemingly inexplicable events, Raymond Roussel’s *Impressions of Africa* (1910) comes to mind, the effect in the *Polyphilo* is largely (and arguably) confusing.

Similarly, conventional narratives rely on a correspondence between the world-conditions of the characters and our understanding of physical and temporal limits in our world. Confidence in the consequentiality of character-world interactions in speculative fictions underpins our suspension of disbelief and allows us to focus on the author’s specific interest in character or plot development. Irruptions in spatial and temporal experience, when a specific intention of the narrative, throw the focus onto those aspects of experience that are familiar to readers looking for architectural cues. The *Hypnerotomachia* is clearly focussed on the empathetic exploration of spatial experiences as an allegory of the acquisition of knowledge in addition to the secondary, though profound, story arc of the pursuit of Polia by Polyphilo. The point here is that the text relies on a level of spatial and temporal orthodoxy despite the fantastic nature of events. In addition, the provision of a suite of images that interpretively communicate the formal and spatial qualities described in the text allow the reader to mediate between the two communicative modes. In the absence of this orthodoxy Pérez-Gómez’s text is doubly challenging since some clarity of space and time helps the reader to understand the eventfulness of the narrative. The absence of the visual mediations arguably unmoors Pérez-Gómez’s narrative from this level of clarity which is ironic given the tradition of architectural treatises acting as guides for speculative practice.

### Showing and telling—cross medial narrativity

As an extension of the narratological observations on space and time, the question of cross-medial narrativity also arises. In contemporary narratology, this is generally raised in the critical analysis of narratives that are communicated across different media, including discussion of how narratives are employed in different critical fields such as philosophy, history, psychology,

and other knowledge domains.<sup>26</sup> For narratologists such as Marie-Louise Ryan who has written extensively and innovatively on the possibilities of narratology, the goal is to find structural relations between different communication contexts and in particular the question of how narratives evolve in 'intermedial' contexts. In particular, one of the initial proponents of intermediality *avant la lettre* was Gotthold Lessing who observed the specific capacity of visual media to convey complex spatiality synchronically (specifically the Laocoön Group statue currently in the Vatican), while text-based descriptions (poetry and literature for Lessing) invoked imaginative causality through diachronic change.<sup>27</sup> As we noted previously, the provision of illustrations in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphilo* anticipates and employs the semantic gap between text and image, all the better to narrate the transformation of the protagonist. The text, as it is read and understood, recites the transformational steps from a phenomenal experience and emotional state that transforms physiological states into moments of self-realisation, but crucially it is in the accompanying imagery that the select moments of transformation are depicted.

### Summary: narrative, empathy and ethics

Perhaps this is where, for Pérez-Gómez, the core value of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphilo* lies—the recognition that an intermedial narrative must exist in order for there to be genuine validation that the narrative's ultimate goal is to instil a sense of ethical obligation towards the visualising of transformations. While he does not, in my view, explicitly state that this is the case, the frequency with which Pérez-Gómez appeals to a sense of love (*philia*) for architecture and the clear aspiration for this form of empathy to be a condition of practice, has led to the analysis presented here. Clearly there is great ambition on the part of Pérez-Gómez for an engagement with architecture and a recognition that the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphilo* is an especial text in presenting a narrative of desire and transformation—why else write the *Polyphilo*? It is more than an academic exercise in matching contemporary experience with that of the Renaissance since it deliberately appeals to different sensibilities than those present on the cusp of the digital era.

It is at this juncture that we might ask whether there are contemporary examples of intermedial narrative forms in architecture. Certainly, major contemporary texts such as Bjarke Ingels Group's *Yes is More* (2009) and, though less well known, Jimenez Lai's *Citizens of No Place* (2012) incorporate contemporary graphic novel conventions to speak about architectural propositions.<sup>28</sup> But if these examples lack the specific *ekphrastic* role of mediating between complex text and imagery, substituting the conventions of manga and graphic novels that communicate sparingly simple visual details, what of the current evolution of imagery driven by artificial intelligence? Moreover, what are the ethics of this form of image making? Clearly there is an abundance of sumptuous examples being produced which, on the basis of the black-box model of predictive machine-learning models, are providing a dizzying array of imagery that is beyond the capacity of an individual to produce. Is this imagery anything more than an epiphenomenal by-product of AI capacity in other areas? Or will it have the capacity to produce narrative sequentiality that will emulate the original intent of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphilo*? Pérez-Gómez, and perhaps many others, would say no since the process, by definition, lacks the commitment and the emotional

register of human agency, but if the technical analytic achievements of narratology in text and image creation continue to develop, then perhaps we'll learn to love it too.



## NOTES

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13. Robin Curtis & Richard George Elliott (Translator) (2014), "An Introduction to *Einführung*" in *Art in Translation*, 6:4: 353–376, DOI: [10.1080/17561310.2014.11425535](https://doi.org/10.1080/17561310.2014.11425535).
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