

OLIVIA LONGO

ORCID: 0000-0002-4961-2249

University of Brescia, Italy

OVERCOMING THE IMAGE. FROM THE MYTH OF THE MODERN MOVEMENT TO SENSORIAL ARCHITECTURE

PRZEWYCIĘŻANIE OBRAZU. OD MITU MODERNIZMU DO ARCHITEKTURY SENSORYCZNEJ

Abstract

This paper aims to show that the power of myth has brought about great transformations within the evolution of compositional processes in the history of modern and contemporary architecture. The concept of myth will be placed in relation to the events of the Modern Movement and its critical developments which still condition the architectural design today. Among the different production processes, sensory architecture is more convincing, while the search for the image is secondary.

Keywords: modernity, complexity, image, body, sensation

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest wykazanie, że siła mitu spowodowała ogromne przemiany w rozwoju procesów kompozycyjnych w historii architektury modernistycznej i współczesnej. Pojęcie mitu zostaje przedstawione w odniesieniu do zjawisk związanych z modernizmem i jego kluczowymi realizacjami, które do dziś warunkują projektowanie architektoniczne. Spośród różnych procesów wytwórczych bardziej przekonująca jest architektura sensoryczna, podczas gdy poszukiwanie obrazu jest drugorzędne.

Słowa kluczowe: współczesność, złożoność, obraz, ciało, doznanie

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of humankind, the concept of myth has been transformed becoming more or less important with the passing of time. In Greece, the myth was valued by Homer's Iliad and Odyssey. In the sixth century BC, the Jonica school marked the transition from Mýthos to lōgos by rejecting the aristocratic-priestly culture based on authority and faith and characterized by an unbalanced relationship between those who pass down the myth and those who use it. However, in philosophical reflection this relationship is balanced because rationality (lōgos) is common to both.

Remaining open to new contributions, in Plato's philosophy myth was used as a teaching tool. However, apart from Plato and the Utopians of the Renaissance, western philosophy is a rationalization of existence that rarely deals with myth.

In the seventeenth century, Giambattista Vico understood myth as an elementary form of communication, characteristic of the “barbaric” era of Homer, when man experienced strong emotions and had vigorous imagination.

The Romantics linked mythological traditions with artistic production (Schlegel) and with religious sentiment (Schleiermacher).

In the nineteenth century, many philosophers disavowed the rationalizing function of philosophy thus contributing to the renewed interest for myth that was at the centre of anthropology and history of popular traditions (Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Stirner, Sorel, Bakunin). Myth was considered a tool for understanding existence, not only in its rational aspects, but also in its emotional ones. It was recognized that among primitive people myth interpreted nature and exorcised human fear of the unknown. Adorno and Horkheimer argued that it is a mistake to regard myths as dark areas of the mind to be rationally illuminated, because their content cannot be completely neutralized by pouring it into science.¹

Beyond the various dialectics and the related positive or negative values that have generated endless tensions and dichotomies, the importance of myth remains as the engine of experimentation and tension towards an unattainable perfection, but remains useful for the development of man’s thought.

2. THE MYTHOLOGEM OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE

The expression “modern architecture” refers to a historical period of architecture when for the first time architecture, as an object and a project, was strongly influenced by the critique of contemporary historiography.

In 1936, in London, the myth of the Modern Movement was founded with the publication of the book *Pioneers of the Modern Movement from William Morris to Walter Gropius* by Nikolaus Pevsner.

As Biraghi points out, the profile of this phenomenon seems to be outlined not objectively but instrumentally in a unitary sense. In fact, we can find all the internal contradictions and the multiplicity of the various aspects that distinguish it. On the one hand, the faith in science and technology, on the other, the romantic idea of the concept of speed figuratively represented by the myth of the machine.

While for Pevsner the goal was to force a unity between the various souls of architecture of the early decades of the twentieth century, losing sight of the different nuances that characterized them, his student Reyner Banham analytically stressed that modern architecture is derived from a plurality of personalities and currents of thought.²

In his book *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, through the description of an “Early Age of the Machine,” Banham brilliantly intuited that the revolution in progress would not end with this “first phase” but would be followed by a different “age of the machine” like the one we are currently experiencing. In 1985, when Martin Pawley asked Banham about the title of his *Theory and Design in the “Second” Machine Age*, published a few years later,

¹ See L. Maiorca, *Dizionario di filosofia, scienze sociali e dell’educazione*, Loffredo, Naples 1999, pp. 184–185, trans. O.L.

² See M. Biraghi, *Storia dell’architettura contemporanea II. 1945–2008*, Giulio Einaudi, Torino 2008, pp. 3–4, trans. O.L.

Banham replied that the “project” was already out of time and that the time of the “sixth” or even “seventh” age of the machine had already arrived.³



Ill. 1. Frame of *La casa di Filippo Tommaso Marinetti*, video by Gian Luca Margheriti, 2021. From YouTube, <https://youtu.be/0HdTX-Im60Y> (access: 18.08.2021; an interpretation of the image made by O. Longo).

Before continuing this reasoning on modern architecture, I think it is necessary to dwell on the concept of “modernity” recalling Schiller’s “Klassik.” In fact, we know that a high level of modernity has already been present in human history, as for example in the classicism of Greek architecture: that historical, economic, social, and cultural circumstance for which the unique unity of the perfect artistic manifestation occurred. By referring to the most primordial meaning of the term “game” that we can consider as the activity which the first child in the world spontaneously practiced, Schiller considers the game to be the highest form of human activity. In fact, he is driven by two impulses: towards the material, that is to say all that is life and connected to his sensitivity, and as well as towards that which is formal, that is to say, figure, in relation to his faculty of thought.

According to Schiller, these two instincts integrate and regulate each other in the game only, because the object of the playful impulse is beauty as a living figure and as a figurative life. Therefore, only in the development and education of the playful instinct the harmony of contingency and necessity, freedom and passion are realized. This is what the Greeks perceived and realized in the figures of the Olympic gods, neither subject to inclination, not to will alone, neither to the materials constraints of the laws of nature nor to the spiritual constructions of the laws of ethics alone, but rather to a need that embraced both and from the unity of which authentic freedom comes.⁴

³ See M. Biraghi, *Prefazione. Il giovane Banham e la prima età della macchina* [in:] S. Montagner (ed.), *Architettura della prima età della macchina*, Christian Marinotti, Milano 2005, p. 5, trans. O.L.

⁴ See V. Verra, *Il pensiero tedesco dopo Kant* [in:] E. Severino (ed.), *Filosofia. Storia del pensiero occidentale*, vol. 4, Armando Curcio, Rome 1988, p. 1055, trans. O.L.

I would like to underline the importance of this kind of “unity,” which is different from the one sought by Pevsner, where there is a particular complexity between physicality and abstraction. This complexity can be found in the same definition of “rolling stone” that Marco Biraghi ascribes to Banham’s book, above mentioned, and first published in 1960. In the preface to the 2005 edition, Biraghi recognizes the originality of this book and its radical separation from the Modern Movement beyond possible definitive definitions, established once and for all. The volume expresses a centrality, so to speak, “complex and continuous,” that is capable of constantly shifting its objective over time: proposing itself as a criticism of the reductive official vision of modern architecture, showing in all its real complexity and contradiction the panorama of theories and projects of the last glimpse of the nineteenth century, and opening up on that panorama future perspectives that Banham himself decodes through the brilliant intuition of further future “machine ages.”⁵

Through the tireless work of Sigfried Giedion, the myth of the machine, understood as “New Tradition,” led to the consolidation of the myth of the Modern Movement, fed by the institution of CIAM where, however, with great difficulty, Giedion tried to bring together the different representatives of this modern architecture. Since the first congress in 1928, there have been clear disagreements between Le Corbusier’s idea of a “strong state” and the strategy for changing social structures promoted by Mart Stam, Hans Schmidt, and Hannes Meyer.

Two fronts are therefore evident: mechanization on the one hand (Le Corbusier) and the collective nature of society on the other (Stam, Schmidt, Meyer). The clash therefore also concerned formal aspects because in contrast to the “five points of a new architecture,” which would change the shape of urban structure by setting the terms of the standardization of the building industry, radical architects fought to eliminate aesthetic convictions in urban planning, shifting interest towards general concerns. This dichotomous tension also characterized subsequent CIAM until 1932 in Moscow, where the theme of the “functional city” apparently converged the different thoughts of the congress participants.

In fact, the two opposite faces, material-sensitive and abstract-formal, continued to create unsolvable conflicts between the different ways of conceiving the planning and organization of the modern city. On the one hand, architects who wanted to deepen the political and social aspects of urban organization, towards a scientific and materialistic conception of architecture, on the other, Le Corbusier and his supporters, interested in solutions that disregarded any political-social confrontation, with no regard for putting architect at the service of society’s needs. Therefore, from the CIAM of 1933, along the route Marseilles-Athens, after a careful selection of the guests, the self-mythologization of the following CIAM is consolidated. Unlike the previous ones, it is characterized by a linear development aimed at unity between architecture and urban planning. This idea of unity also remains in the post-war CIAM with the aim of becoming custodians of the idea of modern architecture. The effects of this desire are evident in the second part of the *Storia dell’architettura moderna* by Leonardo Benevolo, published in 1960, where the “Modern Movement” becomes synonymous with “modern architecture” and is used to indicate an apparently compact and homogeneous block of architectural experiences. In the VIII CIAM, Ernesto Nathan Rogers takes a leading role in discussing the topic of the “heart of the city” thus beginning the conflict between the old and the new generation of architects. However, in the IX Congress, the Smithsons

⁵ See M. Biraghi, *Prefazione...*, *op. cit.*, p. 7., trans. O.L.

respond to the abstraction of modernist functions with the concreteness of four different levels of social interrelation, associated with four scales of human aggregation: home, street, district, city (Urban Re-identification). The model of life that the Smithsons depict clearly contrasts with Le Corbusier's *Unité*, and *Ville Radieuse* and is presented through a series of photographs where the spontaneity of community life is represented by the image of children playing in a street.⁶

The priority of dwelling becomes the engine of urban transformation: from Heidegger's writings we know that man does not live only in his own home and that building (*bauen*) also means dwelling: the buildings that are not dwellings remain determined in reference to dwelling, in so far as they are at the service of man's dwelling, so that a building is already in itself a dwelling.⁷

The issue of habitat is again addressed in the X CIAM of 1956 in Dubrovnik, organized by the group of so-called "dissidents" architects (Smithson, Jacob Bakema, Aldo Van Eyck, and others) who assumed the name of Team Ten. The absence of the greatest exponents of the old generation and the exhausting discussions that emerged from the messages sent by these to the participants of congress determined the convocation of the last CIAM of 1959 in Otterlo, Holland.

At the end of the CIAM, the critical review of the Modern Movement arose and it was characterized both by the search for an architectural-urban system tending to the universal, marked by the claim to be an expression of human needs and therefore adaptable to any context beyond time and history.

Team Ten, on the contrary, proposes a system with internal coherence that ensures quality even in the presence of different languages as the contexts in which they fit. The group thus implemented an operation of strong relativization that initiated the demolition of the mythical construction of the Modern Movement, especially through the thoughts of Reyner Banham and Manfredo Tafuri.

Analysing the actual modernity in its real technological endowments, rather than from the point of view of purely stylistic aspects, as it had been done in previous historiographies (Giedion for example), Reyner Banham disassembles the most evident and profound, and therefore most resistant, myths of architecture in the twentieth century. In addition, Banham highlights the construction of modern architecture's image of the Modern within the context of industrial buildings of early century of the American cities, by which both Gropius and Le Corbusier had been inspired.

Circumscribing the phenomenon between the mid-nineteenth century and 1931, when modern architecture's crisis was already verifiable in all sectors and at all levels, Tafuri demystified the story of modern architecture. As if it were a "consolatory fable", Tafuri reveals the true origins of the concept of "modern movement". He underlines the formation of urban ideology as the overcoming of late-romantic mythologies, the role of artistic avant-gardes as the elaboration and expression of unsatisfied needs for which it is up to them to take charge of architecture and urban planning, the management of the plan in the social-democratic cities and the disappearance of the ideological role of architecture within the framework of American capitalism and the economic planning of five-year plans in Russia.⁸

⁶ See M. Biraghi, *Storia...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 4–12, trans. O.L.

⁷ See M. Heidegger, *Saggi e discorsi*, Mursia, Milano 1976, pp. 96–97, trans. O.L.

⁸ See M. Biraghi, *Storia...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 12–15, trans. O.L.

2.1. ARCHITECTURE AS ART AND THE COINCIDENCE OF OPPOSITES

According to Ignasi De Solà-Morales, the crisis of modern architecture led to the conception of aesthetics as the production by a subject of elementary perceptive experiences capable of generating meanings through emotions. As all other fields of aesthetic creation, architecture acquires the absolute freedom of perceptual experimentation, which results in the openness to experimental positions especially about the effects of forms, materials, and spaces.⁹

If it is true that architecture became an art when society reached a certain degree of wealth and moral culture,¹⁰ then you can use some parallels in the history of art that can help us to understand modern architecture. On the other hand, it is also true that in a short period of time and space, the work of art concentrates a vision of the human condition and can sometimes mark the different stages of progress.¹¹

According to Hauser (1956), renouncing the harmony and chromatic beauty of impressionism, modern art opposes impressionism because it wants to be “ugly” on principle. In painting, it destroys pictorial values, in poetry the feeling and perfection of the image, in music the melody and the tonality. It then becomes a sort of anguished escape from anything pleasing and pleasant, decorative and seductive. The painter, the poet, the musician wants to draw from the intellect, no longer from the feeling. This attraction is sometimes manifested with the purity of the structure, sometimes with the ecstasy of a metaphysical passion. The squalor, oppression and torment of Picasso, Kafka and Joyce are the manifestation of this search for truth against the sensualism of the illusory world of previous art.

In 1916, with Dadaism, this systematic struggle against the conventional means of expression of the nineteenth-century tradition began. This tradition had sought a balance between the old and the new, between tradition and individual spontaneity. On the other hand, Dadaism wants a language that is only spontaneous, so it bases its aesthetics on a contradiction: how is it possible to communicate by destroying every appropriate means? Hauser recalls that the critic Jean Paulhan identifies two categories of writers according to their relationship with the language: the “terrorists” who take refuge in pure and primitive inspiration against every culture, and the “rhetoricians” who are aware that they must pay the price of clichés and stereotypes to be understood.

It was not the works of Surrealists and Dadaists that represented an important passage in the history of art, instead their denunciation of an empty literature at the end of the symbolism period.

Despite the affinities with surrealism, remaining faithful to the “magic of the word,” the “rhetoricians” (Paul Valéry, T.S. Eliot, etc.) continued the symbolist tendency, thus representing an arduous and exquisite formal art. In 1922, two sides of the new literature were identified in Joyce (*Ulysses*) and T.S. Eliot (*The Waste Land*): in the first, the “original” experience prevails, in the second, the “cultural” one. “Original” refers to real life and the problems of existence, while in the “cultural” experience the inspiration comes from historical culture, from intellectual tradition, from the ideal and formal heritage of literature. The expressive means of art are

⁹ See I. de Solà-Morales, *Architettura ed esistenzialismo: una crisi dell'architettura moderna*, Casabella, 1991, no. 583, p. 40, trans. O.L.

¹⁰ See A.C. Quatremère de Quincy, *Dizionario storico di architettura. Le voci teoriche*, Marsilio, Venezia 1985, p. 120, trans. O.L.

¹¹ See R. Arnheim, *Entropia e arte. Saggio sul disordine e l'ordine*, Giulio Einaudi, Torino 2001, p. 79, trans. O.L.

irremediably compromised through the radical contestation of Picasso, his self-deification as an artist and the renunciation of art as an unmistakable expression of personality.

The 20th century was so full of profound contrasts that the main theme of art became the conjunction of extremes, the synthesis of the highest contradictions. Surrealism itself then developed into an art founded on the paradoxical nature of every form, on the absurdity of all existence. Its discovery of a “second reality” inseparably amalgamated with the common reality, even if very different from it, leads us to the dualism of being, to the double bottom of existence, to the contrast between concrete and abstract, sense and spirit, dream and wakefulness. Modern art is marked not so much by the coincidence of these opposites, on the contrary, it is characterised by the fantastic character of this coincidence. Absurdity of life thus becomes the real item and, in particular, the absurdity of modern life that in Joyce’s *Ulysses* is represented through the psychic apparatus of modern man: inclinations, impulses, talents, automatisms, rational and irrational behaviour. In the modern novel the protagonist renounces to describe the flow of thoughts and associations in which the hero is no longer the individual but the “day of life in a metropolis.” During this day, a new conception of time coincides with the simultaneity of the contents of consciousness, with the constant confluence of different times and with the relativity of space and time.¹²

Einstein himself has often said that in his scientific research many substantial passages had been driven only by intuition based on experience. In 1934, in his *Mein Weltbild*, Einstein wrote that defining the expression “scientific truth” is not easy because the meaning of the word “truth” is different depending on whether it refers to psychological facts, mathematical proportion, or to a theory of natural science. For Schopenhauer, and even Einstein, man is pushed towards art and science in order to create a clear and simple image of the world: this is the impulse of the painter, the poet, the philosopher, and the naturalist. They feed on this image and make it their centre of gravity, seeking the calm and solidity that allow them to escape from the narrow circle of their whirling personal existence.

However, the extreme clarity and certainty can only be obtained at the expense of uncertainty. If we want to learn something from the methods employed by theoretical physicists, Einstein himself says that we must not listen to their words but observe their actions because, while creating, a person thinks that the products of his imagination are necessary and natural. He does not consider them – and does not want others to consider them – as inventions of thought, instead he considers them as concrete realities. In fact, the way in which he sees the past and the present of the field to which he devotes himself may depend heavily on what he expects from the future and what he wants to obtain from the present. Logical thinking alone cannot provide us with knowledge of the world of experience, and purely logical propositions are empty in front of reality.¹³

3. CONCLUSION: ARE THERE NEW MYTHS TODAY?

As Giambattista Vico affirmed in his *New Science*, if there is no infinite progress of humanity and every civilization has its own “course” which, at its peak, stops and becomes a crisis,

¹² See A. Hauser, *Storia sociale dell'arte*, vol. 4, *Arte moderna e contemporanea*, Giulio Einaudi, Torino 2001, pp. 223–231, trans. O.L.

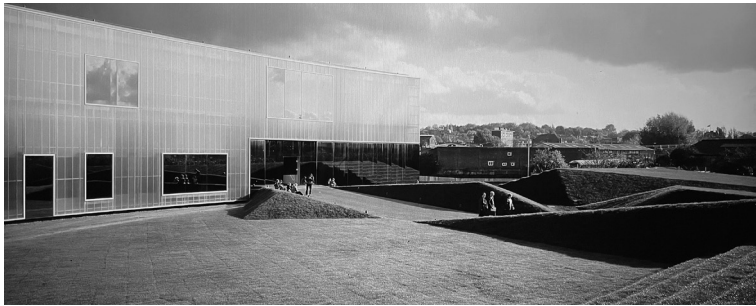
¹³ See A. Einstein, *Come io vedo il mondo*, Newton Compton, Roma 1988, pp. 32–41, trans. O.L.

we can imagine that after the collapse of the myth of the Modern Movement of the last century, the creation of new myths for the architecture of the 21st century can be proposed again. However, before a renewed ability to grow again materialized, Vico warns us that principles, institutions and styles of conduct will weaken and corrupt until a dramatic relapse into a “second barbarity.”¹⁴ No one today can say whether we have already passed the time of Vico’s “second barbarity” or if we are still struggling with the crisis of the second half of the last century.

In 2008, Biraghi identifies thirteen phenomena – probably still present today in 2021 – that define current “myths” and “rituals”, traceable only through “clues” often in contradiction with one another.

Biraghi recalls these phenomena by describing the concept of “Globalization,” “Identity” and “Cloning,” defining “Architecture as a work of art,” the spread of the “devouring historical fever,” Architecture as a catalogue (standardization), the buildings with prestigious signatures. He underlines the importance of eco- and bio- prefixes, the architecture of “Continuity” strongly linked to the search for figuratively abstract architecture with purist and neoplastic references, the conquest of “new promised lands” (the People’s Republic of China and the United Arab Emirates), the concept of “Lightness” that attracts many architects from Calvin to science till the complete disappearance of architecture, the numerous large engineering companies that have colonized the Earth from the twentieth century to today, the brands of the “Archistar system.”

Going back to the image, its construct, and its potential that represent our core questions, we can find “After image,” the thirteenth phenomenon that is in last place of the list and that leads to the new fruitful and forthcoming opportunities of an “after” contemporary architecture where image is a source of mutability, sense, and sensation. In conclusion, Biraghi refers to Van Berkel who stated that generating multiple and surprising “after images” in order to strengthen the structural logic, spatiality, and vision of each image is the right solution, rather than condemning the inevitable image.¹⁵



III. 2. Laban Centre for Contemporary Dance, Herzog & de Meuron, 2003. Frame of *Top 5 Herzog and de Meuron Buildings*, video by The B1M, 2018. From YouTube, https://youtu.be/7kf_tvDfUIo (access: 18.08.2021; an interpretation of the image made by O. Longo).

A concrete answer to this “after image” could be the architecture of Herzog and de Meuron’s architectural production. In 2001, in a round table, Jacques Herzog states that his deep

¹⁴ See S. Moravia, *Vico* [in:] E. Severino (ed.), *op. cit.*, vol. 3, Armando Curcio, Roma 1988, p. 862, trans. O.L.

¹⁵ See M. Biraghi, *Storia...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 509–532, trans. O.L.

interest in the physical world originates in the old history of human culture based on the dialectic between material and immaterial. On the one hand, he refers to the abstract painting of American artists and to their effort to destroy all traces of figuration, production, and materiality, on the other, to German Romanticism of the nineteenth century as an example of an almost alchemical perception of the world. From this point of view, Herzog considers his work and the one of his colleagues de Meuron as focused on the dialectic between immaterial and material, that is to say, on the paradox of the physical world.

Herzog reminds everyone that in the current phase of human civilization, most of our perceptive energy is absorbed by the visual impact of electronic media. Our culture moves today, more than ever, towards more intangible values. For this reason, through the conscious stimulation of both tactile and olfactory faculties, Herzog and de Meuron's architectures are always conceived in such a way as to involve the five senses. This way of conceiving architecture aims to contrast a type of design based mainly on illustration and images. Using a strategy of hyper-materiality, that calls material conditions of structure into question from the beginning, the paradox of this process consists in the search for the very moment when materiality transcends immateriality.¹⁶



Ill. 3. Switch House, Tate Modern, Herzog & de Meuron, 2016. Frames of *Vancouver Art Gallery – A Lecture by Jacques Herzog, Herzog & de Meuron*, video by Vancouver Art Gallery, 2015. From YouTube, <https://youtu.be/G9n2PA4mt8>, 18/08/2021 (an interpretation of the images made by O. Longo).

In other words, as Deleuze writes, there are two ways of overcoming figuration: abstract form, and the Figure or “the sensation”, as it was called in a very simple way by Cézanne. The Figure is the sensitive form which refers to the sensation that acts directly on the nervous system that is made of flesh. Otherwise, the abstract form turns to the brain acting through itself, which is closer to the bones. The sensation has nothing to do with the “sensational” and

¹⁶ See T. Mori (ed.), *Immateriale | Ultramateriale. Architettura, progetto e materiali*, Postmedia, Milano 2004, pp. 105–107, trans. O.L.

the spontaneous, it is addressed to both the subject (the nervous system, the vital movement, the temperament) and the object (the fact, the place, the event).

Phenomenological thinkers say that the two things are indissoluble, the being-in-the-world, meaning that I become in the sensation and, at the same time, something happens through the sensation, one for the other and the one within the other. Body is in itself both subject and object. Beyond the impressionists, the lesson of Cézanne is that feeling is not in the free and disembodied game of light and colour (impressions) but in the body. The colour is in the body, the sensation is in the body and not in the air. The sensation is what is painted. The body affected by a feeling, not represented as an object, is painted on the canvas.¹⁷



Ill. 4. *Study for the human body* (1949) and *Study for a head* (1952), Francis Bacon. Frames of *Francis Bacon: vita e opere in 10 punti*, video by Artesplorando, 2016. From YouTube, https://youtu.be/SYOIw26_7EU (access: 18.08.2021; an interpretation of the images made by O. Longo).

To conclude, Ean White's work *Boundary Interference* is an example of the complex duplicity described in this paper. On an internal wall, behind a bench made of foam rubber, at a height just above the central point of the spine, devices were placed to emit the recording of noise produced by car traffic. When the listener sits on the bench and leans back, the transfer of sound through the bones takes place, producing the sensation of perceiving the sound of traffic inside his body. Space is thus silent and empty until human activity modifies this condition through the negation of an image in favour of tactility and continuous transformation.¹⁸

¹⁷ See G. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon. Logica della sensazione*, Quodlibet, Macerata 1995, pp. 85–86, trans. O.L.

¹⁸ See T. Mori, *op. cit.*, pp. 93–97, trans. O.L.

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Author's Note:

Assoc. Prof. Olivia Longo, PhD, Arch.

Architect, PhD in Architectural Design, Associate Professor in Architectural and Urban Design at the DICATAM University of Brescia, where she teaches *Architecture and Architectural Composition*. Her interdisciplinary research focuses on “Military and Boundary Landscapes” through scientific analysis and experimental designs of the Great War and Cold War sites in north-eastern Italy. Since 2015, she has been a member of Lombardy’s Commissione regionale per i beni paesaggistici. Since 1996, she has coordinated and participated in national and international scientific activities such as: coordinator of the seminar *Architecture and Communication* at the School of Architecture and Planning in Washington DC (2006); participant at the international exhibition *Temporary Cities* in Moscow (2006); coordinator of the international workshop *Liquid box* in Agrigento (2007). She has been a teacher and scientific responsible in Summer and Winter Schools at the University of Palermo (2007 School of Advanced Studies) and at the University of Brescia (2016 <http://sschool-garda-fronts.unibs.it/>, 2019 <http://issre-incowanaba.unibs.it/>). She taught *Theories of Contemporary Architecture* (1999–2004) and *Laboratory of Architectural and Urban Design* (2004–2010) at the University of Palermo. In 2010, she coordinated a Summer Workshop at the IUAV University in Venice. She is the author of about ninety scientific publications. She has participated in design competitions, winning awards and mentions.

olivia.longo@unibs.it