

## *Vitruvius Crucifixus: Architecture, Mimesis and the Death Instinct*<sup>1</sup>



Illustration 1. Vitruvian Man within a square by Cesariano, taken from Vitruvius, *De Architectura*, Como, 1521.

The comments made by Vitruvius on the subject of proportions have proved to be highly influential within the history of architectural theory. They have provided the grounding for much subsequent theoretical work on the relationship between buildings and the human body. The tradition of relating the layout of temples and churches to the form of the body is captured explicitly in the drawings of Francesco di Giorgio, where the ghost-like figure of a human body is quite literally mapped onto the plans and elevations of buildings. It is these drawings, along with those of Fra Giocondo, Cesariano, Leonardo da Vinci and others, that Rudolf Wittkower addresses in his discussion of proportions in his seminal work on the centralised church of the early Italian Renaissance (Wittkower, 1962). Joseph Rykwert and John Onians, among others, have continued the tradition of

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<sup>1</sup>This paper could not have been completed without the inspiration and assistance of many colleagues. In particular, I am grateful for the help and advice of Yvonne Sherratt, who has already made the argument for a link between narcissism, *mimesis* and the death instinct (see M. Phil. thesis, University of Cambridge). I am also grateful to Matt Connell, with whom the initial ideas for this paper were first discussed.

scholarship emanating from Wittkower's earlier insights on the links between the human body and buildings. It could be argued, however, that the full significance of Vitruvius's comments has yet to be understood. The concern of these scholars has been largely for the symbolic meaning of these proportions and the mathematical ratios that underpin them. So far there has been little investigation into the question of how the use of these proportions might help human beings to relate to buildings at a psychological level.

Traditionally, proportions have often been viewed as something 'out there'. It is perhaps only for God to recognise them. If we are to pursue an existing model of how we might identify with those proportions, at best we might perhaps follow the logic of the *Phaedrus*, where Plato argues that when we sense something 'harmonic' our souls recognise the fundamental order of the universe. (Plato, 1973: 50-57) According to Plato, souls are mixed in the *chora* of the universe of the same substance as the universe itself. The tension that exists between the imperfect mortal body and the perfect immortal soul composed as it is of the stuff of the universe, is set right by recognition of the essential harmony of the universe, revealed in an harmonious sound or image. It is this Platonic tradition which informs more recent ontological enquiries, notably the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer in *The Relevance of the Beautiful*. (Gadamer, 1986.)

Questions about the body, however, and about the way in which human beings identify with the world have been central to much recent theoretical debate, not least in the domain of psychoanalysis. And it is to psychoanalytic theory that we might turn in order to shed some fresh light on these issues, and to further our understanding as to how the use of proportions might offer a mechanism to enhance the way in which human beings relate to their built environment at a psychological level.

### ***Vitruvius Crucifixus***

We might start, perhaps, with one of the most famous illustrations on the theme of proportions, that of Vitruvian man to be found in Cesariano's 1521 edition of Vitruvius, *De Architectura*. [Illustration 1] This is one of two images with which Cesariano illustrates Vitruvius's comments on the human body, which is so perfectly proportioned, that it may be inscribed within either a circle or a square.

‘For if a man be placed flat on his back, with his hands and feet extended, and a pair of compasses centred at his navel, the fingers and toes of his two hands and feet will touch the circumference of a circle described therefrom. And just as the human body yields a circular outline, so too a square figure may be found from it. For if we measure the distance from the soles of the feet to the top of the head, and then apply that measure to the outstretched arms, the breadth will be found to be the same as the height.’ (Vitruvius, 1960: 73.)

One of the intriguing aspects of this illustration is the similarity which the figure bears to images of the crucified Christ. There are a number of incidental parallels between the two persons, and a clear stylistic indebtedness to the crucified Christ in representations of Vitruvian man. In some, for example, Vitruvian man is seen to have his head slumped to one side. But in this one by Cesariano, not only is there a scroll above the head of the figure reminiscent of the INRI of the crucifix, but the hands and feet are displayed precisely as though they have been affixed to the cross. The parallels extend to Cesariano’s other famous image of Vitruvian man. Alongside the image of Vitruvian man inscribed within the square, Cesariano includes a second image of Vitruvian man, a man spread-eagled within a circle, his hands and feet touching the circumference of that circle. [Ill. 3] As Vitruvius describes in the original text, here the man is ‘stabbed’ in his midriff by one arm of a pair of compasses, while the other arm is used to circumscribe the figure, ‘striking’ the hands and the feet. Vitruvian man is thus ‘wounded’ in the same parts as Christ. But it is the first image — Vitruvian man inscribed within a square — which is more immediately reminiscent of images of the crucifix.

The links between Christ and Vitruvius have been observed by a number of scholars. The two, it has been noted, were near contemporaries.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Vitruvius’s comments on the ideal proportions of the human figure, which should also be present in the layout of temples has, of course, exerted a major influence on the design of christian churches throughout the Renaissance. Not only do we find proportions of idealised human figures inscribed in various plans of christian buildings, but representations of Christ himself take on the proportions of Vitruvian man. As has been observed, Brunelleschi’s wooden crucifix in the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence shows Christ with the proportions of the *homo ad quadratum*, the distance between his outstretched hands matching his height from head to toe.<sup>3</sup> Nor is it out of place that Brunelleschi should

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<sup>2</sup>See, for example, the comments of John Dee in Hart, V. 1994.: 69-71.

<sup>3</sup>On this see Battisti, E: 42. For a detailed elaboration of this subject, see Casazza and Boddi,: 207-212.

have chosen to portray Christ, the very manifestation of God on earth, with the ‘perfect’ proportions of Vitruvian man, proportions which echo the cosmic harmony of the universe. With Brunelleschi’s crucifix, Christ has become ‘Vitruvianised’. Yet the Renaissance was as much about the christianisation of a Vitruvian tradition as it was about the Vitruvianisation of a christian one. Hence we find in Cesariano’s illustrations a clear allusion to the crucified Christ, which further develops the links between architectural form and the crucifixion of Christ, already evident in the cruciform layout of the medieval basilica.

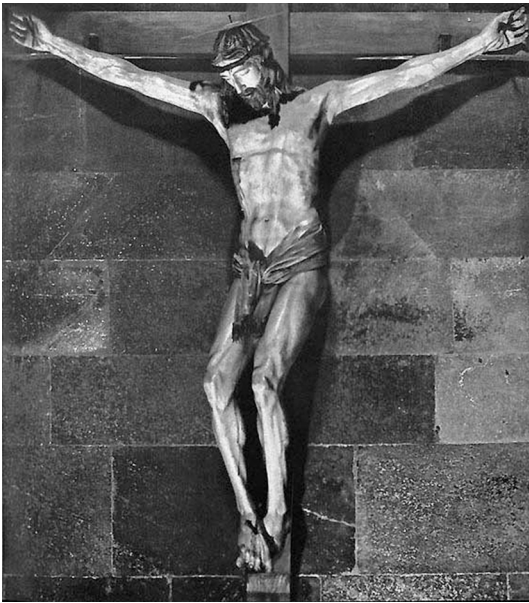


Illustration 2: Crucifix, Filippo Brunelleschi, Santa Maria Novella, Florence

This connection — this christianisation of Vitruvian man — is further corroborated by the manuscripts of Vitruvius. There are two variants in the text that describes the way in which the hands are held out in the figure of Vitruvian man. The manuscripts here vary between the use of the (more common) form ‘*manus pansas*’ and the variant ‘*manus spansas*’. (Vitruvius, 1990: 7) The verb ‘*pandere*’ simply means ‘to open out’, or ‘to extend’. The hands are ‘outstretched’. In the variant the verb ‘*spandere*’ is used. This has a secondary meaning of the way that a priest holds out his hands ‘in prayer’.<sup>4</sup> The variant ‘*manus spansas*’ therefore marks a religious moment in the representation of

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<sup>4</sup>*Spandere* is a contraction of *expandere*. See s.v., *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, Leipzig: Teubner, 1931, vol. 5, p. 1599: ‘*porrigere; de Christianis qui orantes brachia in crucis formam extendunt*’, (Cf. Tert. *Orat.* 29, p. 200. 9; Paul. Med., *Vita Ambr.*, 47)

Vitruvian man. From Vitruvian man with his hands 'outstretched' we move to Vitruvian man with his hands 'outstretched in prayer'. It is in this shift from '*manus pansas*' to '*manus spansas*', from the hands 'outstretched' to the hands 'outstretched in prayer' that Vitruvian man becomes, in effect, 'christianised'. It is in this shift that we recognise not only the Vitruvianisation of the Christian world, but also its corollary, the Christianisation of the Vitruvian world. In effect, Vitruvian man adopts the posture of Christ on the cross. Vitruvian man becomes crucified. *Vitruvius crucifixus*.

### **Freud and the 'Death Instinct'**

How, then, might psychoanalytic theory help us to understand the role of proportions? It is through the emblem of Vitruvian man on the cross — the, as it were, dying, crucified Vitruvian man — that we might approach the theme of 'death', and through this engage with one of the central themes in psychoanalysis. And it is through a creative and deliberately indulgent reworking of Freud's work on 'death' that we might begin to understand the role of proportions in helping the individual to identify with the built environment.

The theme of 'death' is, of course, fundamental to Freud, especially to the late Freud, the metapsychological Freud. Freud's late theory is centred around the conflict between *Eros* and *Thanatos*, between 'love' and 'death', between 'life instincts' and 'death instincts'. *Eros*, as the 'life instinct', serves to counter the tendency towards *Thanatos*, the 'death instinct', and acts as a force to complicate life. It continuously counteracts and delays the 'death instinct'. *Eros* is therefore set in opposition to *Thanatos*, that which seeks resolution and quiet. Thus the 'death drive' becomes for Freud one of the fundamental impulses within human behaviour.

The 'death drive' in Freud can be seen to emanate from the moment of birth itself. Birth is seen as a violent trauma which upsets the pleasure of the time in the womb. For Freud the time in the womb relates to the development of the '*id*', the '*id*' being the faculty that absorbs and enjoys pleasurable sensations. The '*id*' is the domain of the unconscious. Herbert Marcuse defines the '*id*' as follows:

The '*id*' is free from the forms and principles which constitute the conscious, social individual. It is neither affected by time nor troubled by contradictions:

it knows “no values, no good and evil, no morality”. It does not aim at self-preservation: all it strives for is satisfaction of its instinctual needs, in accordance with the pleasure principle. (Marcuse, 1969: 29-30)

The womb provides the *'id'* with a refuge, a state of placid protection and constant gratification. With birth this freedom from disturbance is lost forever. Yet the memory of this period in the womb remains, and subsequent life is governed by a desire to regain this lost quietude, this lost paradise. Life is dominated by a regressive compulsion, a desire to return to the womb. This striving for ‘integral gratification’ dominates all subsequent life. Thus for Freud the drive towards equilibrium that results is none other than a ‘continuous descent toward death’, where death finally provides that longed for resolution and quiet. According to Marcuse:

The death instinct is destructiveness not for its own sake, but for the relief of tension. The descent toward death is an unconscious flight from pain and want. It is an eternal struggle against suffering and repression. (Marcuse, 1969: 29)

From this drive towards equilibrium Freud develops the ‘Nirvana principle’ — the urge to return to the Nirvana of the womb — which becomes for Freud ‘the dominating tendency of mental life, and perhaps nervous life in general’.

Related to the ‘Nirvana Principle’ is the ‘pleasure principle’, which is, in effect, one expression of the ‘Nirvana Principle’:

. . .the effort to reduce, to keep constant or to remove internal tension due to stimuli (the ‘Nirvana principle’. . .) finds expression in the pleasure principle; and our recognition of this fact is one of the strongest reasons for believing in the existence of death instincts.’ (Freud, 1984: 329)

At a straightforward level, then, we might recognise an apparent parallel between the ‘drive’ for harmony within the principle of architectural proportions, as recognised by Vitruvius, and the ‘drive’ for resolution that underpins the ‘death instinct’ in Freud. There is an obvious point of comparison between the state of equilibrium sought in proportions, and the equilibrium of the ‘Nirvana principle’. The harmony sought in the proportions of Vitruvian man — the, as it were, ‘dying’, crucified, Vitruvian man —

matches the harmony sought in the 'death instinct' in Freud. Proportions offer a mechanism that strives for a resolution, a reconciliation of tensions. The aesthetic gratification of harmonic proportions in architecture might therefore be seen to represent a return to the Nirvana of the womb, to the sensory realm of the protected. Yet this realm need not be a closed, interior space. It need not be a 'womb-like' space. Indeed, according to the logic of the argument, 'open' architecture would have a similar effect, providing that it is harmonious.

By itself, however, this model appears to be somewhat inadequate. It cannot account for the stimulation that may be induced by this release of tensions. Harmonious architecture may equally prove to be innervating. It is as though the gratification of aesthetic contemplation might serve not so much to resolve the death instinct as to transcend it.

### **Marcuse and Narcissus**



Illustration 3. Caravaggio, *Narcissus* (Rome, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica)

Here we might refer to the work of Herbert Marcuse, a somewhat unlikely figure in this context, in that his work has been concerned largely with the theme of *Eros* rather than *Thanatos*. Yet he offers a further interpretation of the interplay of *Eros* and *Thanatos* in the moment of aesthetic contemplation which sheds some light on this question. According to Marcuse, the distinction between *Eros* and *Thanatos* is not fully resolved in Freud. Marcuse goes on to suggest that these two seemingly opposite drives have a common origin, and may therefore be reconciled. For Marcuse the crucial images that bring together *Eros* and *Thanatos* are Orpheus and Narcissus. Orpheus is the poet who plays so beautifully on his lyre that he is able to hold even wild animals spellbound. Narcissus, meanwhile, is the beautiful youth whom Aphrodite punishes for spurning the advances of Echo by making him obsessed with his own image. [ill. 2] His frustrated attempts to grasp his own image reflected in a pool lead to his despair and death. On his death Narcissus's body turns into a flower of the same name.

Marcuse picks up on the models of Narcissus and Orpheus. For Marcuse, the images of Orpheus and Narcissus reconcile *Eros* and *Thanatos*:

They recall the experience of a world that is not to be mastered and controlled but to be liberated — a freedom that will release the powers of *Eros* now bound to the petrified forms of man and nature. These powers are conceived not as destruction but as peace, not as terror but as beauty. It is sufficient to enumerate the assembled images in order to circumscribe the dimension to which they are committed: the redemption of pleasure, the halt of time, the absorption of death; silence, sleep, night, paradise — the Nirvana principle not as death but as life. (Marcuse, 1969: 164)

In this fusion of the Orphic and the Narcissistic world Marcuse sees a reconciliation of *Eros* and *Thanatos*. In this sense he goes beyond Freud to offer a vision in which art plays a creative role. It is a world which embodies the principles of both *Eros* and *Thanatos*, a static world, a world at rest, but a fundamentally poetic world. It is a world where 'static triumphs over dynamic; but it is a static that moves in its own fullness — a productivity that is sensuousness, play and song.' (Marcuse, 1969: 164)

The Nirvana principle — the return to the womb — gives us a sense of the real meaning of 'death' in the 'death instinct'. Death is not death as finality, as absence of life. The death instinct calls for a death which is not death, a death which *transcends* death, a



death which is put in the service of life. This death is akin to the death of Christ on the cross — to return to our starting point — a death that gives others life. Likewise, it is akin to the death of Narcissus — the ecstasy of the narcissistic absorption into the self — a death that results in the birth of a flower. It is in the resurrection from the cross, in the blossoming of the flower, that the ‘death instinct’ is realised and death itself is transcended.

The myth of Narcissus also gives us an insight into the way in which we interact with our environment. Unlike Orpheus who worked with song, Narcissus was obsessed with contemplation and aesthetic beauty, and as such relates more to the realm of architecture. Marcuse’s model of Narcissus comes from the world of myth and painting. We should also consider, however, the motif of Narcissus as it was pursued by Freud.

In Freud Narcissus becomes one of the two models of object-love: ‘anaclitic’ and ‘narcissistic’. According to Freud there is a primary narcissism in everyone. This narcissistic love can take four forms. To quote Freud, a person may love:

1. What he himself is.
2. What he himself was.
3. What he himself would like to be.
4. Someone who was once part of himself. (Freud, 1984: 84)

Freud sees narcissism as a negative mechanism. He sees it as a regressive, childish delusion, that in effect prevents us from recognising the ‘other’ in the ‘other’. Narcissism, for Freud, would mean that we constantly see ourselves in the ‘other’, and cannot fully grasp the alterity of the ‘other’. Anaclitic love, by comparison, is preferable, because it respects ‘otherness’. Here, however, I want to read Freud against Freud, and suggest an alternative approach to narcissism. I would want to suggest — in line with a number of more recent theorists — that there is something positive in narcissism that needs to be rescued.

Narcissism in Freud refers to a mechanism for potential engagement with the ‘other’, even though the ‘other’ may in fact be the ‘self’. Subjects ‘read themselves’ into the ‘other’, see themselves reflected in the ‘other’. In effect the figure of Narcissus is emblematic of a mode of engaging with — identifying with — the other. It becomes, in other words, a means by which the subject can identify with the object. Narcissus stands

for the 'refusal to accept separation from the libidinous object'. (Marcuse, 1969: 170)

As Marcuse explains:

Primary narcissism is more than autoeroticism; it engulfs the 'environment' integrating the narcissistic ego with the objective world. . . The striking paradox that narcissism, usually understood as egotistic withdrawal from reality, here is connected with oneness with the universe, reveals the new depth of the conception: beyond all immature autoeroticism, narcissism denotes a fundamental relatedness to reality which may generate a comprehensive existential order. (Marcuse, 1969: 168)

Narcissus, for Marcuse, offers a model of a 'non-repressive order, in which the subjective and objective world, man and nature are harmonized.' (Marcuse, 1969: 194) In this respect narcissism retains a sense of the 'childishness' which Freud associates with it, in the dissolution of the self into the other parallels the underdeveloped subject/object split of the child. The model of Narcissus gazing at his own reflection without recognising it as such would therefore parallel the period preceding the 'mirror stage', as defined by Lacan, in which the child has yet to recognise its own reflection. In this context, however, narcissism should not be seen as an immature regression into a childish state, but as a positive development that broadens the subject and overcomes the divide between the self and the other.

The myth of Narcissus, it can be argued, offers us an insight into the way in which human beings relate to the world. This relatedness involves identification with the object at the level of the symbolic, by which the image of the object is, in effect, a 'reflection' of the subject. This identification between subject and object operates within the realm of the unconscious. In effect, an unconscious — *narcissistic* — identification takes place.

### **Adorno and *Mimesis***

This is a mechanism which Adorno has already observed in the context of architecture. In 'Functionalism Today', the only article of his specifically devoted to the question of architecture, Adorno addresses the way in which humans constantly attach symbolic meaning to the built environment:

According to Freud, symbolic intention quickly allies itself to technical forms, like the airplane, and according to contemporary American research in mass psychology, even to the car. Thus, purposeful forms are the language of their own purposes. By means of the *mimetic* impulse, the living being equates himself with objects in his surroundings. (Adorno, 1979: 34)

This last sentence, 'By means of the *mimetic* impulse, the living being equates himself with objects in his surroundings', is, surely, one that holds the key to exploring the whole question of how human beings situate themselves within the built environment, and points to an area in which the domain of psychoanalysis may offer crucial insights into the mechanism by which humans relate to their habitat. It begins to suggest, for example, that the way in which humans progressively feel 'at home' within a particular building, is precisely through a process of symbolic identification with that building. This symbolic attachment is something that does not come into operation automatically. Rather it is something that is engendered gradually, in Adorno's terms, through the '*mimetic* impulse'. *Mimesis* here should not be understood in the terms used, say, by Plato, as simple 'imitation'. Rather *mimesis* in Adorno, as indeed in Walter Benjamin's writings, is a psychoanalytic term - taken from Freud - that refers to a creative engagement with an object. It is, as Adorno defines it, 'the non-conceptual affinity of a subjective creation with its objective and unposited other'.(Adorno, 1984: 80)<sup>5</sup> *Mimesis*, as Freud himself predicted, is a term of great potential significance for aesthetics.<sup>6</sup>

To understand the meaning of *mimesis* in Adorno we must recognise its origin in the process of modelling, of 'making a copy of'. In essence it refers to an interpretative process that relates not just to the creation of a model, but also to the engagement with that model. *Mimesis* may operate both transitively and reflexively. It comes into operation both in the making of an object and in making oneself like an object. *Mimesis* is therefore a form of imitation that may be evoked both by the artist who makes a work of art, and also by the person who views it. Yet *mimesis* is richer than straight imitation. In *mimesis* imagination is at work and serves to reconcile the subject with the object. This imagination operates at the level of fantasy, which mediates between the

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<sup>5</sup>Here we might recognise a distinction between the treatment of the concept of *mimesis* in Benjamin and Adorno. For Adorno *mimesis* is 'non-conceptual' and relates to a sensuous correspondence with the world. For Benjamin it is conceptual, and relates to a non-sensuous correspondence.

<sup>6</sup>' . . . I believe that if ideational mimetics are followed up, they may be as useful in other branches of aesthetics. . .' (Freud, 1960: 193) For further reading on *mimesis*, see Erich Auerbach, 1953; Taussig, 1993; Gebauer and Wulf, 1995.

unconscious and the conscious, dream and reality. Here fantasy is used as a positive term. Fantasy creates its own fictions not as a way of escaping reality, but as a way of accessing reality, a reality that is ontologically charged, and not constrained by an instrumentalised view of the world. In effect *mimesis* is an unconscious identification with the object. It necessarily involves a creative moment on the part of the subject. The subject creatively identifies with the object, so that the object, even if it is a technical object — a piece of machinery, a car, a plane, a bridge, whatever — becomes invested with some symbolic significance, and is appropriated as part of the symbolic background through which individuals constitute their identity.

It is important to recognise here the question of temporality. Symbolic significance may shift — often dramatically — over a period of time. What was once shockingly alien may eventually appear reassuringly familiar. The way in which we engage with architecture must therefore be seen not as a static condition, but as a dynamic process. The logic of *mimesis* dictates that we are constantly assimilating to the built environment, and that, consequently, our attitudes towards it are for ever changing. The very process of assimilation within *mimesis*, as it is used here, implies an appropriation, a ‘claiming’ of the object, and it is here, perhaps, that parallels with hermeneutics are most obvious.<sup>7</sup> The understanding of *mimesis* as a form of creative appropriation echoes the theme of Narcissus trying to reach out and *appropriate* his own image. Benjamin evokes this theme in his description of the *mimetic* impulse: ‘Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction.’ (Benjamin, 1969: 217) The assimilation which *mimesis* demands with the inanimate world reveals the link with the death instinct. The action of *mimesis* constitutes an almost chameleon-like process of adaptation. This process, as Miriam Hansen observes, ‘involves the slippage between life and death, the assimilation of lifeless material . . . or feigning death for the sake of survival.’ (Hansen, 1993: 53)

The origin of this process lies in the instinctual mechanisms of self-preservation. Animals, when trapped in potentially life-threatening situations, rather than run away, will often freeze into seemingly lifeless forms. Through this action they attempt to blend with their environment, and thereby escape the gaze of the predator. A similar trait may be found in humans. ‘The reflexes of stiffening and numbness,’ as Adorno and Horkheimer note,

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<sup>7</sup>On this see Jacques Derrida’s critique of hermeneutics in Derrida, 1987: 255 ff. Likewise *mimesis* can be seen to share the same epistemological fragility of hermeneutics, in that its only source of validation is that of the interpreting agent.

'are archaic schemata of the urge to survive, by adaptation to death life pays the toll of its continued existence.' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979: 180) Thus, somewhat paradoxically, the feigning of death preserves life. 'Death' is used in the service of life. This is a tactic that represents not simply the subordination of the self to nature, but also an overcoming of nature, a defence against the dissolution of the self. Benjamin himself distinguishes between a *mimesis* of pure sublimation of the self, which seeks to blend in with the environment purely defensively, and a *mimesis* of 'innervation' which sees the environment as a source of empowerment. A *mimesis* of 'innervation' stresses the creative act of self expression against a given background. And it is precisely this active — rather than defensive — form of *mimesis* which offers a basis for creative expression in art.

*Mimesis* therefore constitutes a form of mimicry, — but it is an adaptive mimicry — just as when a child learns to speak and adapt to the world, or when owners take on the characteristics of their pets. In fact it is precisely the example of the child 'growing into' language that best illustrates the operation of *mimesis*. The child 'absorbs' an external language by a process of imitation and then uses it creatively for its own purposes. Similarly, within the realm of architecture we might see *mimesis* at work as architects develop their design abilities: it is this process which also allows external forms to be absorbed and sedimented as part of a language of design. Clearly, *mimesis* goes beyond straightforward mimicry, if by mimicry we understand a response which is merely instinctual. *Mimesis* necessarily involves a sense of volition and intentionality on the part of the subject. It does not simply look back and mimic what is already given, but it relies on a process of creative engagement, of 'conjuring up' something for the future. It is in this moment that the magical base of *mimesis* manifests itself. Like the magician who plans the trick, *mimesis* contains within it the sense of control of some organised project. Yet what distinguishes *mimesis* from magic is that it does not attempt to deceive in the same way. Thus, for Adorno, art as a form of *mimesis* is 'magic delivered from the lie of being truth.' (Adorno, ????: 222) In distancing itself from the illusionistic claims of magic, *mimesis* surpasses magic, while nonetheless remaining within its conceptual orbit.

Although *mimesis* involves a degree of organised control, and therefore operates in conjunction with rationality, this does not mean that *mimesis* is part of rationality. Indeed, in terms of the dialectic of the enlightenment, we might perceive *mimesis* as constitutive not of rationality, but of myth, its magical 'other'. *Mimesis* and rationality,

as Adorno observes, are 'irreconcilable'. (Adorno, 1984: 81) If *mimesis* is to be perceived as a form of correspondence with the outside world which is articulated within the *aura* of the work of art, then enlightenment rationality, with its effective split between subject and object, and increasing emphasis on knowledge-as-quantification over knowledge-as-sensuous-correspondence, represents the opposite pole. In the instrumentalised view of the enlightenment, knowledge is ordered and categorised, valorised according to scientific principles, and the rich potential of *mimesis* is overlooked. All this entails a loss, a reduction of the world to a reified structure of subject/object divides, as *mimesis* retreats even further into the mythic realm of literature and the arts.

At the same time *mimesis* might provide a dialectical foil to the subject/object split of enlightenment rationality. This is most obvious in the case of language. Language becomes the 'highest level of mimetic behaviour, the most complete archive of non-sensuous similarity'.<sup>8</sup> (Benjamin, 1978: 336) *Mimesis* for Benjamin offers a way of finding meaning in the world, through the discovery of similarities. These similarities become absorbed and then rearticulated in language, no less than in dance or other art forms. As such language becomes a repository of meaning, and writing becomes an activity which extends beyond itself, so that in the process of writing writers engage in unconscious processes of which they may not be aware. Indeed writing often reveals more than the writer is conscious of revealing. Likewise the reader must decode the words resorting to the realm of the imagination which exceeds the purely rational. Thus the activity of reading also embodies the principles of *mimesis*, serving as the vehicle for some revelatory moment. For Benjamin the meaning becomes apparent in a constellatory flash, a dialectics of seeing, in which subject and object become one for a brief moment, a process which relates to the experience of architecture no less than the reading of texts.

### ***Vitruvius Crucifixus***

Architecture, therefore, along with the other visual arts can be viewed as a potential reservoir for the operation of *mimesis*. In the design of buildings the architect may articulate the relational correspondence with the world that is embodied in the concept

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<sup>8</sup>For Adorno *mimesis* refers to a sensuous correspondence with the world. On this see footnote 5 above.

of *mimesis*. These forms may be interpreted in a similar fashion by those who experience the building, in that the mechanism by which human beings begin to feel at home in the built environment can also be seen as a *mimetic* one.

*Mimesis*, then, may help to explain how we identify progressively with our surroundings. In effect, we read ourselves into our surroundings, without being fully conscious of it. 'By means of the *mimetic* impulse,' as Adorno comments, 'the living being equates himself with objects in his surroundings'. Understood in the terms of our discussion of Narcissus, this *mimetic* impulse might be seen as a mechanism for reading ourselves into the other. We relate ourselves to our environment by a process of narcissistic identification, and mimetically absorb the language of that environment. Just as Narcissus saw his own image in the water, without recognising it as his own image, so we identify ourselves with the 'other' — symbolically — without realising that recognition of the 'other' must be understood in terms of a *mimetic* identification with the other, as a reflection of the self. And this refers not to a *literal* reflection of our image, so much as the metaphorical reflection of our symbolic outlook and values.

The aim throughout is to forge a creative relationship with our environment. When we see our values 'reflected' in our surroundings, this feeds our narcissistic urge, and breaks down the subject/object divide. It is as though — to use Walter Benjamin's use of the term *mimesis* — in the flash of the *mimetic* moment, the fragmentary is recognised as part of the whole, and the individual is inserted within an harmonic totality.

It is within this framework that we can begin to address the role of proportions, which can be understood as emblematic of an attempt to relate to the built environment, not through empathy, but through identification. The use of the human figure — and the use of human *proportions*, albeit of an idealised human figure — represents an enabling mechanism, by which this process might be enhanced. The human figure is 'reflected' back out of the object. The human figure is 'echoed' — to use a term from the myth of Narcissus — in the building. Yet, here equally the limitations of proportions are exposed. If proportions are to achieve their objective they must offer a framework for a creative engagement with the world. The subject must be able to abandon itself in assimilation with the non-identical. Once proportions become codified into an instrumentalised system, however, they enter into a terroristic standard of totalitarian rule, a logic of domination. Human values are imposed upon the environment, rather than humankind

subjecting themselves to the environment, assimilating to it in a process of mimetic identification. It is a case of *natura naturata* versus *natura naturans*.

In this respect, the tradition in the Renaissance of inscribing human figures into the plans of buildings, and into the elevations of columns and so on, can be seen as a form of *mimetic* device, which vicariously evokes the desire for identification. The figure inscribed within the plan becomes a *mimetic emblem* for a physical body within the actual building. The emblem must be understood here as a device which is 'magically' invested with the properties of an ordinary object, much as in the sacrifice when the victim is offered up as a substitute for others. Thus the figure incised in the ground plan transcends mere representation. The figure takes on a symbolic significance, which can only be understood beyond the framework of enlightenment rationality. It is precisely this investment which locates such devices within the realm of the mythic. These emblems become vehicles of identification, the objects of wish-fulfillment. This evokes the principle of the sacrifice, as Lévi-Strauss has described it:

For, the object of the sacrifice precisely is to establish a relation, not of resemblance, but of contiguity, by means of a series of successive identifications. (Lévi-Strauss, 1966: 225)

Hence we might read these inscriptions of the human body as being informed by a mimetic impulse, an attempt to relate to an inanimate object. They act as mimetic devices, vicarious objects of identification, charged with symbolic significance like the victims in a sacrifice.

It is here that the significance of the image of *Vitruvius Crucifixus*, Vitruvian man as the dying, crucified Christ becomes apparent. The theme of sacrifice can also be seen to operate at a broader level. In our mimetic engagement with the built environment it is precisely the 'self' which is sacrificed. The subject effectively surrenders the self to the other, in order that it might live on through a creative engagement with the other. Narcissus can therefore be seen as the quintessential emblem for aesthetic contemplation. Gazing at his own reflection, he identifies with the image, surrendering himself to it. In trying to grasp the beauty of that image he drowns, only to give life to a flower. He thereby enacts the 'sacrifice' of *mimesis*.



This 'sacrifice' — this surrendering to the other — remains a precondition of aesthetic experience. As in the myth of Narcissus, the sacrifice transcends death. In the 'shock' of aesthetic recognition, the subject is 'forced open' and exposed to a meaningful relationship with the object. The subject is decentred and broadened. The subject *identifies* with the object, and it is in the forging of new identities during the dynamic process of mimetic assimilation that death itself is resisted and overcome. Hence we might recognise the 'sacrifice' that lies at the basis of all architecture. As such, myths of sacrifice, which have filtered into architectural folklore might be understood within the framework of *mimesis*.<sup>9</sup> It is as though the sacrifice of a human life is required in order to 'animate' the inanimate stone. And we might read this 'sacrifice' replicated in the sacrifice of the self within the mimetic identification of aesthetic experience.

In this process we can recognise an almost 'mystical' moment, that shares something of religious ecstasy and the experience of love. If love, in Lacanian terms, is what fills the 'gap' between the self and other, *mimesis* can be seen to be the aesthetic equivalent of love. Hence we find terms with clear references to the world of love, like *jouissance*, being used to describe aesthetic experiences, while thinkers such as Julia Kristeva have made explicit comparisons between aesthetic experience and love.<sup>10</sup> And if the 'death' of Vitruvian man can be seen as a sacrifice that transcends death and thereby serves the life instinct, a sacrifice where *thanatos* is put at the service of *eros*, the erotic character of this moment is evoked by Cesariano's other image of Vitruvian man spread-eagled within a circle. [III.3]

For Benjamin art — through *mimesis* — takes on a quasi-religious turn, in offering the possibility of a return to some lost paradise following the 'fall' of humankind through the instrumentalisation of the world. If we are to understand *mimesis* as offering access to some form of paradise, then this promise is evoked in the mimetic emblem of Vitruvian man. Just as the death of Christ on the cross opens up the possibility of a life after death, just as the death of Narcissus gives rise to a flower, so the emblematic 'death' of Vitruvian man leads to the possibility of a deeper, more meaningful engagement with the built environment.

The *aesthetic* gratification that results from this *mimetic* moment — the recognition of the self in the other, the self as part of, at one with, the whole — induces the 'nirvana

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<sup>9</sup>For example, the myth of Master Manole at the monastery of Arges. On this see Eliade 1970: 164-190.

<sup>10</sup>On this see Lechte, 1990: 215-219.

principle'. The narcissistic gratification of the self reflected back in this stimulating engagement with the environment recreates the sensuous oneness of the womb, the 'integral gratification' of the womb. The memory of the nirvana of the womb is recognised, and a state of pleasurable bliss is reached.<sup>11</sup> All conflicts are resolved, as the death instinct is both realised and transcended. The vital experience that flares up in this sensuous engagement evokes the blossoming of the flower on the death of Narcissus. And in the *jouissance* of this intensely poetic moment, paradise is regained.

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<sup>11</sup>All this begins to hint at a theory of visual pleasure for architecture. Such a theory might subscribe to the same processes of narcissistic identification outlined by Laura Mulvey in her theory of visual pleasure for film. Yet it would extend beyond the straightforward identification with human beings to include identification with the built environment itself. This is not to reduce architecture to *mere* visual pleasure. Architecture should also offer the possibility of a meaningful engagement with the world. For architecture, like art, should exceed the empty gratification of beautiful illusion. Art, for Adorno, should never be easy. Art has to be engaged with in a process that evokes the *durcharbeiten* — the 'working through' — of psychoanalytic theory. See Mulvey, 1975: 16-18.

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